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THE GAME AND THE CANDLE





THE GAME AND THE CANDLE

BY

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'NANCY,' 'GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART!' 'SCYLLA OR CHARYBDIS?'

ETC.

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THE GAME AND THE CANDLE.

CHAPTER I.

THE ruling passion is strong in death, and therefore it is no wonder that Henry Etheredge, who through a life of fifty-six years has always postponed other people's pleasure and convenience to his own, should on his last day but one go on holding his wife's hand long after the posture it entailed upon her had become one of irksome fatigue. He had fallen into the nightmare counterfeit of slumber which morphia gives, and during the three-quarters of an hour of insensibility to mortal pain wrested from the drug, his

fingers had kept their grasp upon hers. She had been leaning over him when he first clasped them, and in that strained position she has to remain.

To withdraw them would be to wake him ; and yet after awhile the stooped attitude grows almost unbearable. She tries to relieve the strain a little by pressing her free hand strongly against her own back, but even with this slight relief endurance is nearing its limits, when he opens his eyes. They light on her face, but do not rest there, wandering instead round the large room.

‘ Do you want Nurse Baker ? ’

‘ No. ’

‘ Your sister ? ’

‘ No. ’

Afraid to tease him with further questions, she steps back for a moment behind the shade of the curtain, and, putting a hand

on each hip, gives her tired back a long, straightening stretch. Her husband's voice interrupts it.

‘Jane!’

‘Yes?’

‘I wish to speak to you. I have something to say to you.’

His mind has during the last few days been hovering so doubtfully on the borderland of consciousness that her demurrer is a natural one.

‘Do you think that you are up to it?’

‘I am never likely to be more up.’

‘You will not put it off till to-morrow?’

‘I have no reason to suppose that I shall have a to-morrow.’

He is not one to be soothed by reassuring falsities, so she does not contradict him, but only stands quietly waiting, while he gathers his faint strength for the coming effort. It is not with ease that that preparation is

made ; and she, too, has time to get ready —if she only knew for what !

His eyes, that through their dimness yet show how keen they were before death's forecast shadow blurred them, dwell with a sort of relentlessness on her.

‘Your chain is very near its cutting.’

‘Have I ever conveyed to you that I thought it a chain ?’

He puts by the implied reproach.

‘How long has your servitude lasted ?’

She forgets to except against the word.

‘Eight years.’

On that he has to halt awhile, and the next seems a new topic.

‘Do you remember the summer of ’9—?’

It would not be true to say that she starts, but just one breath comes crookedly.

‘Yes.’

‘Five years ago.’

‘Yes.’

‘It was an exceptionally hot season.’

‘I think it was.’

‘Especially the month of July.’

‘Indeed!’

‘And—in consequence’—a slight but pregnant accent on the two last words—
‘you went out into the garden after dinner more often than you usually do.’

‘Did I?’

‘You had done so on the night of the 18th?’

It seems unreasonable to expect anyone’s memory to bear the burden of so trivial and distant a detail, and she is silent. He repeats the question with the same sort of sick insistency by which his eyes are holding her.

‘Would you mind answering me? Do you remember?’

There is a frightened catch in her voice, but she no longer hesitates.

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘At about ten o’clock you were standing in the circular garden beside the fountain, between that and the yew hedge, you—and a companion.’

Since he first brought the mention of that hot summer with such apparent irrelevancy into his dying words, she has known that some unsuspected terror is drawing near. Yet the instinct has put no weapon of defence into her cold clenched hands.

‘And *you*? Where were you?’

‘I was behind the yew hedge.’

‘Behind the yew hedge?’

‘Yes. You would call it eavesdropping.’

It is the scornful word that had flashed into her heart, but which, since he is dying, she herself could never have employed. To be dying is a weapon of mortal power. The departing should in mercy use it gently. She stands stock-still, and he makes an exhausted pause. Beyond the labour of his

breathing there is absolutely no sound in the dim, luxurious room, whose dropped blinds and lowered awnings imperfectly exclude what must be the exceeding glory of the August day outside.

‘I became aware that you and your companion were parting as lovers.’

She does not start now—braced for the worst.

‘But we *were* parting!’

Her tone is scarcely one of apology; certainly not one of conscious guilt.

‘So I gathered.’

‘And from that day—five years and a month ago—to this, we have neither met nor written.’

There is no eagerness of asseveration in her words, no fevered hurry to convince; only the statement of an undoubted and undoubtable fact.

‘I am aware of it.’

Again the advancing tide of death makes him pause for breath ; and even when speech comes it is not from him. She takes his hand, as if in assertion of her right to hold it, and despite her full rush of life, speaking with even more difficulty than he, says :

‘ I want to tell you—I should not be likely to deceive you now—that—that—you heard all there was to hear ; that—that there was not—there never had been—anything more !’

‘ Do not you think that what I heard was enough ?’

At that she drops her head, and lets fall his fingers. How still it is ! Even the peacocks, usually suffered to screech at will upon the yew hedges in the garden outside, have been removed to a more distant part of the pleasure-grounds.

‘ I am not blaming you ’—the faint voice comes at last with cold leniency. ‘ I believe

that in act you are an innocent woman ; that, being such as you are, you did your best ; and as to your love—no one could rob me of that, since I had never possessed it.'

He has made her life bitter to her for eight years, and she is in the very act of learning that he knows—has known for five of those years—of her devotion to another ; and yet, simply because he is dying, out of sheer pity of it, she is seized by an almost overmastering temptation to tell him that he is wrong, that in his way he has been dear to her. It is not because it is a lie that she does not utter it at last, it is because it would be a useless lie.

'I have always respected you very much!'

The tribute sounds in her own ears almost an insult in its cold baldness, and his answer matches it.

'Thank you. I have always found you very civil and obliging.'

Again silence. The shock of the light that his phrase has thrown upon her past dumbs her. Is it thus, with a little withered civility on either side, that they are to part on Eternity's edge ?

‘Civil and obliging!’ she repeats, with a sort of horror in her voice. ‘Have I been no more than that?’

‘I have asked for nothing more.’

It is true ; and as he speaks the memory of the eight chilly years they have passed together comes numbingly back upon her. She need feel no remorse for the inadequacy and formality of her service. He had asked nothing more.

But he has shut his eyes again ; and the sunk gray lids, the pathos of the bony hand lying on the folded-down sheet, recall that banished ruth. She kneels softly down at the bedside, and lays her hand in its warm and satiny youth upon his.

‘I have fallen very far short of what I meant to be and do when you married me. I should be very glad if you could say that you forgive me for all I have done and left undone. Do you think you could bring yourself to say and feel that you forgive me?’

‘Certainly, if there is anything to forgive.’

His magnanimity freezes her, and yet pinches her heart with a new remorse.

‘If there is anything that I could do for you—any wish that I could fulfil——’

She breaks off, struck silent by the hollowness of her own offer. What can she—what can anyone do for this moribund Dives, whose path to the ultimate goal has already been made as smooth as the conditions of mortality will allow? He has had everything that can ease the passage; yes, even love, though not hers. But, vacant and perfunctory as the proffer of her services sounds in her own ears, he accepts it.

‘Thank you ; I *have* something to ask of you ; that is why I wished to speak to you.’

For awhile he lies exhausted, gathering his strength ; and she, seeing by a glance at the clock that the time for taking some stimulant has come, lifts him with skilful gentleness, and holds the glass to his lips. He has never been a good patient ; jibbing at the nauseous recurrence of those distasteful nourishments by whose aid the physicians of to-day prolong ‘the sharpness of death.’ But now he swallows the offered potion with difficult eagerness. It gives him for the moment the desired power of utterance.

‘You are a young woman. It is not likely that you will long remain a widow.’

The idea may be a familiar one to her ; none the less ~~is~~ the slight shocked start she gives perfectly genuine.

‘Need you say that to me now ?’

‘Yes ; for it has a reference to what I am about to ask of you.’

Athwart the fog of coming dissolution his eyes send out a ray of the old sharp light, and she feels her impotency to hide the dismayed apprehension that has flooded her face. He has always been a selfish man. What dreadful promise of posthumous fidelity may he be going to exact? But he has always been a just one, too. His next sentence cuts across this latter thought.

‘You think that I am about to ask you not to marry again?’

He makes an interrogative halt, that has perhaps a grain of malice in it. But she is incapable of answering, and he goes on :

‘You are mistaken. I am not such a dog in the manger.’

Does he see that she draws her breath lighter?

‘You have been what may fairly be called

a good wife to me. I have the evidence of my own ears that, in face of what was to you a strong temptation, you remained faithful to me. I bear you no ill-will. On the contrary'—how laggingly the words are coming! —'it is because I wish you well that I am going to make a request to you.'

It is from no intention of keeping her on the rack that again he stops, arrested by waxing breathlessness; and despite the prick of vague terror of what may be coming that is goading her, compassion makes her try to stop him.

'Indeed, and indeed, you are not strong enough. Put it off till to-morrow.'

He has no spare breath with which to refuse her request, but he waves it feebly away. Outside there is a light noise of many wings winnowing the air of the summer evening as they pass bedwards to the 'rooky wood.' It has died into silence before

the dying voice resumes its uphill utterance.

‘I have left you very well provided for. No, you need not thank me yet’—as he sees some expression of choking and remorseful gratitude struggling to her lips. ‘Unless you comply with the condition I annex to it I shall revoke that provision.’

‘What condition?’

Her mouth is dry, and the dread at her heart makes the two words hard to frame. Yet again that wave of rueful compassion storming up compels her to add :

‘It would indeed be a hard thing that I should be likely to refuse you *now*.’

‘You will probably think it a very hard thing.’

At that her hands cannot forbear clutching each other over her heart.

‘Tell me—what is it?’

But death, that is clamouring for him,

gives him no leave to hurry ; rather, he has a full minute of altercation with his tyrant before he gains permission to utter his fiat.

‘ It is, that when you replace me—as you undoubtedly soon will——’

‘ Is not it rather cruel to tell me so now ?’

‘ I do not mean to be cruel—I have no time to be cruel—and it is *true* !’

She does not contradict him. Here on this all-solemn edge of time she will sully her lips with no faintest semblance of a lie.

‘ When you replace me—my stipulation is that it is not by the—person of whom you took leave five years ago beside the fountain in the circular garden !’

With a spurt of factitious strength he has pulled himself up somewhat in the bed, and, half leaning forward, watches her with a grim fixedness. She would fain stand out that look, but nature flatly refuses. Although she had known all along that her formless

dread was forerunning some imminent ill, yet the blow, now that it has come, is as felling as if she had had no prevision of it.

‘Would you mind turning your face this way? I cannot see you.’

Through the buzzing in her ears the chill voice penetrates, and with infinite reluctance she obeys.

‘Do you consent to the condition?’

She stands absolutely mute, her face, which she dares not again avert, exposed to his dying scrutiny; and though she knows that he has not much breath to spare, she obliges him to repeat his question.

‘Do you consent to the condition?’

Her lips move inaudibly at first, so that it is only by the eye that he knows she is trying to answer him. Then gradually intelligible sounds issue from them.

‘Is there nothing else you can ask me?’

‘Nothing.’

For a moment or two she stands rigid ; then, distinct and low, speech comes.

‘You have no right to exact such a promise.’

‘Whether I have a right or no, I do exact it.’

His sentence ends with a gasp, and a wave of horror rolls over her at being forced into so hideous an altercation with him at his last hour. She falls on her knees beside the bed, and lifts her locked hands in an agony of supplication to him.

‘You have always been a just man. Tonight I have learnt that through all these years you have been merciful too. Be merciful still ! Ask me something else !’

He makes a weak yet resolute gesture of refusal, and her head falls forward on the counterpane. In her ears a busy fiend is whispering the temptation to acquiesce, to smooth this uneasy death-pillow by a consent.

What will it matter to him if she afterwards go back from her word? him so plainly bound to the land where all things are forgotten? Into the midst of that temptation the faint, breathless voice—faint and breathless, yet persistent—penetrates :

‘ Is your answer Yes, or No ?’

It is evident that the coercion he is exercising upon himself to keep a semblance of calm is using up the feeble remnant of life left him. Agitation has been strictly forbidden him. She is thus murdering him by her delay.

That ‘ Yes ’ is evidently the one talisman which can open the gates of peace to his dying soul. It is the last thing he will ever ask of her. Is it humanly possible to refuse it? And yet—and yet—is not it more impossible still to grant it? Mind and heart are one whirl between the misery of these alternatives. It would take years to decide

between their claims, and she has but some moments.

Once again the relentless whisper—it is but a whisper now—comes :

‘ Yes or No ? ’

She draws herself up from her knees, as if recognizing that the hour for entreaty is past. The whirl in her brain grows calm.

‘ Yes or No ? ’

‘ You have always loved truth. I could not tell you a lie now. If I gave you the promise you ask, I should perhaps break it. My answer is “ No. ” ’

She has shut her eyes while uttering the final clause, that cowardice which had not prevailed to make her fail in action rendering her unable to verify the effect of her words. As absolute silence follows, she opens them again in terror. Has her refusal indeed snuffed out his little spark of life ? But no. As to her freedom from that form of blood-

guiltiness, one glance reassures her. He is still half-sitting in the same drawn-up, tense attitude as before, still eyeing her fixedly.

‘That is your final decision?’

‘Yes.’

The scarcely audible and yet heard monosyllable has hardly crossed her lips before the awfulness of its import under such circumstances fells her once again to her knees, wringing from her afresh a low, hoarse cry for mercy.

‘Oh, forgive, forgive!’

‘Do you mean’—power of speech is running very short with him—‘that you take back your word?’

Her head buries itself deep, deep in the counterpane, and her shoulders shake in a dry convulsion of sobs; but she is dumb. She cannot take it back. His head falls inertly on the pillow; and, too exhausted to speak, he motions her towards the door.

The gesture, in its desperate feebleness, is yet so imperative that, without a word, she drags herself to her feet and staggers out of the room. Husband and wife never meet again.

* * * * *

The bulletin next morning is: 'Much better. Wonderful rally,' so that inquirers reading it go away asking: 'Is it possible that he can pull through after all?' They are answered by the evening message: 'Passed away peacefully at 8.30.'

CHAPTER II.

THE King of Terrors reigns, we are told, equally in the palace and the hovel ; but it is not precisely true. In a large house it is, or at least seems, easier to get beyond the sphere of his sceptre. The master of Etheredge has been dead only thirty-six hours, and yet his wife's sitting-room, which lies in an opposite wing of the house to that lately occupied by him, gives in its air of everyday tranquillity no sign of any consciousness of catastrophe. It looks on to a parterre, and its windows cannot be seen from any of the four avenues up which streams of condolers are driving and walking, so that it is spared

the infinite lugubriousness of pulled-down blinds. But that its tenant is absolutely idle—an unusual condition with her—it might be any ordinary Thursday, instead of the first of her new widowhood.

She scarcely turns her head when someone, who by his immediate following of his own slight knock into the room, has evidently the *entrée*, comes quietly in, and her late husband's secretary, who is also a distant cousin of her own, stands before her.

‘You are resting?’

‘No.’

‘Do I disturb you?’

‘I am not doing anything.’

As no rejoinder follows, she glances at him with a listless surprise.

‘How odd you look! Why do not you sit down?’

Over the condition of his countenance he has perhaps no power; but neither does he

comply with the easily-fulfilled suggestion contained in her last sentence.

‘ I think that all the arrangements are pretty well made.’

‘ Are they ?’

‘ A great many more telegrams have come
Do you care to see any of them ?’

She shakes her head.

‘ Several more societies have intimated
their intention of being represented.’

‘ Have they ?’

‘ Yes.’

She turns the head that is lying on the back of her chair a little more sideways towards the outside pleasantness of flecky blue sky and gently-wagging tall tree-tops, and says sententiously :

‘ He was very much respected ;’ adding after an almost imperceptible pause and effort, ‘ and he deserved to be !’

If she had thought about it she would

have expected an assent from her companion, since she knows that the relations between her husband and his secretary had been pleasanter than her own with the dead man ; but her mental vision is too wholly turned inwards for her to have much observation left for anything outside. It is only when the silence has been prolonged for several moments that she rolls her head round again to the other side, and glances at him with faint inquiry. The expression of his face startles her back into life.

‘*How* odd you look ! Have you come to tell me anything disagreeable ?’

‘Yes.’

She wrinkles her brows, but still there is no great keenness of interest in her tone.

‘What can there be to tell ? I mean ’—reverting to introspection, and addressing herself rather than the young man—‘what is there left of painful to be told ?’

There is a dragging accent of woe in her voice that would not have misbecome the most broken-hearted of widows, and he looks at her with an astonishment tinged with relief.

‘Is it possible that you know already?’

‘How can I tell?’ cries she in an accent of unbridled irritation, such as can be employed only to an intimate friend, or excused except by a condition of badly overstrung nerves. ‘If this is your idea of breaking bad news, Heaven preserve me from it! In God’s name, speak out!’

He knows her too well to need further telling.

‘Mr. Bridge has a communication to make to you about the will. I thought I would be beforehand with him, so that you might not be taken by surprise.’

She is dead silent for a moment or two, her irritation killed by something deeper

and stronger, and evidently pulling herself together.

‘You think there is that in it which would upset me ; but I believe that you are mistaken.’

She has drawn herself up in her chair, abandoning her attitude of listless lolling, while her pretty but strong hands grasp the arms of it till the knuckles stand out through the drawn skin.

‘You know that when he had that surprising rally on Tuesday he sent for Mr. Bridge?’

She gives a slight nod.

‘It was in order to alter his will.’

‘So I supposed.’

The young man has been carefully looking away from her, but now snatches a glance to gauge her ability to bear the imminent stroke. He can detect no sign of flinching.

‘As it originally stood he had made you residuary legatee.’

‘Yes?’

‘But on Tuesday——’

‘Yes, on Tuesday?’

Her breath is not even drawn perceptibly quicker than its healthy wont; the labour and strain are his.

‘On Tuesday he had your name erased, and that of his sister, Miss Etheredge, substituted.’

Are the knuckles showing a little plainer than before through the skin? He hardly thinks so; and there is certainly no other sign of consternation. She is even smiling ever so little.

‘Miss for Mrs. ! It seems a small change to imply an earthquake, does not it?’

He has always known, or perhaps, to speak more accurately, divined her to be a brave woman; but such a pinnacle of cool

philosophy seems impossible to have been climbed unless by the aid of some ladder of preparation.

‘ You knew already ?’

‘ I gave a good guess.’

‘ He told you himself ?’

‘ He—threatened me with something of the kind.’

‘ *Threatened* you !’

‘ Yes. It was not the best way to go to work.’

Her answer is made to the unspoken thought in his mind, and is uttered with the deliberate outsideness of one judging another’s action. She adds, as if to repair any possible breach her statement may have made in the dead man’s reputation :

‘ He had a perfect right to do what he liked with his own.’

His only response is a look of intense regret, to which he cannot help giving a

strong tinge of interrogation ; and, as an answer to it, she somewhat enlarges her explanation.

‘ He made his provision for me conditional on my giving a promise which he tried to exact from me. Do not ask me now what it was.’

‘ Is it likely that I should ?’

‘ I mean to tell you shortly—when—when *it* is over ! I think you have a right to know.’

He is perfectly aware of the event in the past to which she is alluding, and receives with understanding her implication that until after that solemn day which is to put the final seal upon her freedom, her tongue is tied as to aught that relates to it. Yet a question, which after all is nearer akin to an ejaculation, escapes his lips :

‘ And you refused ?’

‘ Yes, I refused.’

The restatement of her now irrevocable action seems to prick her out of her surface philosophy, and she springs out of her chair and hastens to a window. The sash is thrown high, but she lifts her arms above her head and drums with her fingers on the pane. Then she turns swiftly upon him. He has thrown himself into a chair—there is not much of him—and is distressedly pinching up the skin of his forehead with one thin scholarly hand.

‘I refused—do you understand?—to a dying man, and that man my husband—the last request he could ever make to me.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes; and if it were to do again, I should do it again!’

She says it in a resolute, strong voice, as if challenging contradiction, but none such comes, and swiftly revulsion follows. She drops her face into her hands, shuddering.

‘If he had only asked me anything else!’

Her companion’s sole answer is a slight shifting of his position, like a sick man’s vain exchange of one uneasy pose for another. She lifts her face, and, with half-recovered self-control, begins to plead her cause as before a judge.

‘If I had given that promise, I might have broken it ; and surely there is no comparison between the degree of guilt involved in refusing to give a promise, and that of breaking it when given. I appeal to you. Can there be any comparison?’

She has drawn near, and now stands over him ; imperative voice, commanding eyes, and treacherously tremulous mouth all combine to force an answer out of him. It comes reluctantly.

‘As you put it, certainly not.’ Then, in quite a different key : ‘I know that you saw what you thought right, and did it.’

‘Not what *I* thought right; what *was* right!’

‘I do not dispute it.’

She looks out over his head with unseeing eyes, that yet have a species of inspiration, and her voice is low in the intensity of its conviction.

‘I *should* have broken it.’

He has risen — either out of habitual courtesy, since she is standing, or from the sheer restlessness of mental discomfort.

‘You must remember that I am in the dark as to what was demanded of you.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Therefore you must know that I cannot express an opinion as to your rightness or wrongness.’

‘No.’

‘But what you must allow me to feel is bitter, *bitter* regret at the consequences.’

Her face has lost its momentary expression of upliftedness.

‘You mean the loss of the money?’

‘Ye—es.’

His hesitating monosyllable gives her to understand—most unintentionally on his part—that the loss she alludes to covers but half the ground of his concern. A slight flush of understanding runs across her cheeks, and makes her look more like herself, since she is naturally of the blooming, rose-faced sort, to whom any unnatural pallor gives an air of strangeness.

‘You mean that people will be inclined to ask, “What has she done to deserve it?” Well——’

‘Do not say “Let them,”’ breaks in the young man hurriedly. ‘It is what no woman can afford to say.’

‘I was not going to say it.’

The dialogue, painful to both, halts awhile.

Man and woman know that there is more to come, but take the respite of a moment's collected silence—the opulent silence of a late summer morning pungent with petunia scent. It is Mrs. Etheredge who first resumes the use of speech.

‘As for the money——’

He breaks in: ‘I have not yet told you that I am enriched at your expense.’

‘You? Has he left you anything?’

‘An annuity of five hundred pounds.’

Her whole overcast face lights up.

‘Five hundred pounds a year! That will make you quite comfortable.’

‘I should rather think so!’

She draws a sigh of unfeigned gratification, and holds out both her hands to him with a charming gesture of frank goodwill.

‘I *am* so glad! I should certainly never have credited to-day with affording me one perfectly pleasant sensation.’

He takes the offered hands half grudgingly.

‘I can scarcely bear to accept—hardly bear to tell you of it—under the circumstances.’

She gives the hands which she still lightly clasps a little shake of friendly rebuke.

‘How silly! What have the circumstances to say to you? Your annuity stood in the body of the will, did not it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then, what a falsely ingenious way of tormenting yourself it is, to say that you are enriched at *my* expense!’

The generosity of her common-sense seems but so partially to reassure him, that she adds emphatically: ‘And how you *have* earned it!’

He winces, a little wave of new and different pain flowing over his sensitive, thin face.

‘You know that I liked him.’ Then,

feeling perhaps that the present is scarcely the moment for singing the praises of his benefactor to that gentleman's disinherited widow, he adds quickly : ' But to return to you ?'

She gives a rather dispirited shrug.

' To return to me ? Yes, if you like—to my finances, I suppose you mean ?'

' Yes.'

' I shall do very well.'

His face so clearly expresses an anxiously doubtful query that she repeats her assurance in different words :

' I am very fairly provided for.'

His look, in its distressed asking for a preciser statement, leads her into details.

' I have my settlement, five hundred pounds a year ; and my own little fortune comes to about as much more. No one need starve upon a thousand pounds a year.'

His eye wanders round the tasteful luxury

of the room ; while his inner eye, glancing over her past, sees the gold setting which, after all, has made her not very successful married life more endurable, and there is something not unlike consternation in his ejaculation :

‘A thousand pounds a year for *tout potage* !’

She laughs, and, though quite naturally, the sound falls oddly and rather shockingly upon both their ears. Yet her words match it.

‘There is an immense deal of *potage* in a thousand pounds.’

He would dislike her flippancy, did he not comprehend that it is her way of showing her high courage under disaster ; and, after all, he could not dislike it more than she does herself. Yet her untimely mirth has hardly died before it rises again.

‘You must excuse me, but you do look so absurdly miserable ! It is such a paradox

that *I* should have to be consoling *you* for *my* poverty.'

'I shall never be consoled.'

The regret sounds hyperbolic, but the person to whom it is addressed shows no sign of doubting its genuineness; and though she says, with a continued effort at lightness, 'That will be exceedingly silly of you,' the water for the first time stands in her eyes. Nothing could be properer than that they should be wet at such a season. Yet some odd touch of false shame makes her unwilling to acknowledge their presence by wiping them away; and they are still glittering when a second person, this time without a premonitory knock, enters the room. At sight of the secretary she—for it is a woman—gives a slight start of annoyance.

'I thought I should find you alone.'

'Mr. Clarendon came to speak to me about—the arrangements.'

Before this sentence is ended the secretary is at the door. He is not a person to whom a second hint on any subject is ever necessary, and in this case the one he has received has been a pretty strong one. He turns before passing out to make a final remark in a ceremonious voice, which shows no trace of his late emotion.

‘I think I have told you all that is necessary; if anything further—anything you wish done occurs to you—will you let me know?’

He is gone, and Mr. Etheredge’s widow and his sister stand opposite to each other *tête-à-tête*. Placed thus in juxtaposition, the contrast presented by their appearance does not strike either of them, since they are quite used to it.

‘I am afraid I arrived at a malapropos moment,’ says the sister, with a formality that seems to smack more of ‘in-law’ than

‘in love.’ ‘You were talking of business with Mr. Clarendon?’

There is no perceptible accent on the word ‘business,’ yet somehow the widow receives the impression that if it were *not* on business, it was indelicate of her to be conversing with anyone on such a day.

‘Yes ; but I had finished all I had to say.’

‘I have something to speak to you about that does not admit of the presence of a third person.’

Mrs Etheredge gives a slight start. Frances knows, then. She has come to ask her why.

‘We have not met since—the end.’

‘No.’

‘I could not put off any longer thanking you.’

‘*Thanking* me!’

‘Yes—for the way in which you nursed him. I did not think it was in you.’

The compliment is a stinging one ; but it seems to provoke no resentment in the recipient. Perhaps relief at a reprieve, perhaps some more magnanimous motive, keeps her silent and gentle.

‘ It is possible that I have been misjudging you all these years.’

Both look each other in the eyes for a moment. They have never had anything in common, and have been obliged to be incessantly in intimate relations with one another — two admirable engines for the production and fostering of a robust reciprocal aversion.

‘ It is late, perhaps, to make amends now ; but I wish to do what I can.’

‘ Do not ! do not !’

‘ We must be more to each other than we have ever been before, since there is that between us which no third person can share. I have brought you *this*.

You have a right to it—a better right than I.'

As she speaks she draws a miniature case from her pocket. There is an instant's hesitation ; then she presses the spring of the fastening, and looks for a moment with steadfast composure at the face.

'It was taken in Paris by a French artist called Pollet, who was thought a great deal of at the time. He was just twenty-five ; and it was reckoned a good likeness. Of course it was long and long before you knew him.'

There is an involuntary streak of satisfaction in her voice that such a time should have existed. The little oval of ivory is in the hand of the widow of him whom it represents ; but her view of it—a first one, since she has never before been held worthy to see it—is blurred by remorseful tears, a remorse addressed rather to the living than

the dead. She has always so cordially disliked Frances.

‘He never would sit to any of the many painters who asked him, as you are aware, often as I begged him to do so. Perhaps if *you* had pressed him, he might.’

‘I did not like to tease him.’

‘Well, however that may be, since it is the only thing that represents him at all adequately, you have a right to it—a better right than I. Take it.’

‘No, no; not for the world!’ waving the offered sacrifice almost violently away, while her wet look rests on the withered face opposite her, and on the hard little body whose sixty-six winters are cased in the cruelty of a tailor gown—that body in which lies, as she is aware, the broken heart that ought to be hers.

‘I tell you that you have a right to it. You were nearer to him than I. A wife

must be nearer to a man than a sister can be.'

The words sound with horrible irony in Jane's ears.

'I *will not* take it from you!'—putting her hands resolutely behind her back. 'It would be a *crime*! And, besides—do not you see that it says nothing to me? I never knew him when he looked like that. I never knew him when he was young.'

'No, you never knew him when he was young. He was gray-haired, and not what he had been, when first you saw him.'

The unconscious touch of triumph reappears.

'It is not the Henry I knew. It is *your* Henry. There would be no sense in my robbing you of it.'

In the excitement of her compunction she takes her sister-in-law's two hands, and folds them over the object of sacrifice, crying :

‘Keep it! keep it!’

‘If you mean that you do not prize it—that it has no value for you——’

‘Oh no, no! do not put that construction on it! I refuse because I know what it is to you; because I think—I feel sure that if you did give it me, you would repent—afterwards.’

There may be a more pregnant weight of meaning in her accent than she is aware, for a slight gleam of suspicion comes into the other’s sunken eyes.

‘*Afterwards?* Why more afterwards than now?’

Jane hesitates for a second. Shall she tell her why? get it over? The knowledge that the mark of obloquy and disinherittance has been laid upon her by him to whose portrait she is credited with so supreme a claim cannot be much longer deferred. But the impulse passes. The fact that her husband

has set the seal of his disapprobation upon her for all time will be public property soon enough without her hastening the moment of its disclosure. She puts a greater self-command, coupled with gentleness, into her answer.

‘I want you to give yourself time, to wait for a few days—until after—the funeral. If you then repeat your offer, I shall gratefully accept it.’

* * * * *

The date to which Mrs. Etheredge has referred is arrived, for the obsequies—they deserve so pompous a name—of her husband are over. To-morrow they will make the fortune of the local papers, and have even a respectable little paragraph in the London ones. Neither she nor the dead man’s sister has been present at them, since the Etheredges are among the few families who have kept to the once universal law of being repre-

sented at funerals only by their men, so that what figures in the journals as the melancholy cortège is really not melancholy at all, consisting as it does of perfectly cheerful cousins, tenants employed in speculations as to what kind of landlord the widow will make, deputations occupied solely by anxiety as to whether they will catch their train back to town.

Jane has watched the grave black pageant pass down the straight lime avenue, heavy and suitably sombre in its August green, to the church in the park at the end. She can just catch the white glimmer of the Vicar's surplice as he receives it at the Lychgate. Then she turns away to her own distant sitting-room. Miss Etheredge has suggested to her that they should read the service together; an offer which, recognizing the immense sacrifice it connotes, she has accepted with compunctious gratitude.

But her sister-in-law does not appear. Either her grief has overmastered her, or—she has heard. Mrs. Etheredge must pay her last tribute to the dead alone. She kneels at a chair, with an open Prayer-Book before her, and with her eyes following the magnificent words ; but, try as she will, she can summon up no emotion except a sense of oddness in being reading the Burial Service for Henry. Henry is dead, and she is a widow. These two phrases repeat and repeat themselves, sometimes with a muffled remorse, once—but that was instantly strangled—with a prick of shameful joy !

Her solitary service ended, she rises from her knees, and begins to walk to and fro, to and fro, to try to rid herself of the obsession of those twin sentences. But here they are back again ! ‘ Henry is dead ! I am a widow ! I am a widow ! Henry is dead ! ’

She looks at the clock. It must be nearly

time for them to have returned—returned to the master's house without the master. Poor master! A stab of compassion for him pierces her for being dead. It *must* be over now. Why does not Clarendon come to her? He had promised to hasten to tell her how it had gone off. *Gone off!* The phrase strikes her as odious and indecent, yet she does not know how to replace it.

Ah, here he is at last! The thought has just time to cross her mind that it is neither seemly nor like him to break in upon her privacy with such violence, before she realizes that the person entering is not Clarendon. It is Frances Etheredge who stands before her with a livid face, evidently in the clutch of some tremendous emotion.

‘What does it mean?’ she asks in an unrecognizable voice.

CHAPTER III.

TWENTY-FOUR hours have passed since this bomb-like question has burst upon Mrs. Etheredge, and she and Clarendon are slowly pacing the gravel of the circular garden to which her husband on his death-bed had pregnantly alluded. They have been quite silent so far, her new weeds sitting oppressively on both their spirits. She is ashamed of how often through her many more weighty thoughts pierces the reflection that she will have to be garbed in this black dreariness for a whole year. Out of deference to her sister-in-law's feelings she has even assumed that cap, which in the case of young widows

has of late so generally been laid aside. It is she who first abruptly breaks the silence.

‘Where am I to live? I must live somewhere.’

Her companion looks round with a long sigh of annoyance.

‘And to think that you might have reigned here!’

Her eye follows the direction of his with an inevitable regret, that is yet not repentance.

‘I dare say I should have made but a poor sovereign.’

‘That can now, unfortunately, never be proved or disproved.’

She shakes her head several times.

‘Never’—adding, ‘So that in your eyes I may always be a potentially good one.’

‘That is not much of a consolation.’

They walk on a few paces, seeming to be

relapsing into that silence which to-day is so much easier than speech.

‘You have a right to know why I am dethroned.’

‘You think so?’

There is no curiosity in his voice, only an immense, grudging regret.

‘I can tell you *now*—I could not *before*—what the promise was that I was unable to make to him.’

She pauses, as if the engagement to confession which she had made were one not easy to carry out. His hasty rejoinder seems rather anxious to thrust back her avowal than to hurry it on.

‘Do not, if you had rather not.’

‘But I had rather ; it is due to you. He tried to exact from me a promise not to—not to—marry——’

‘Not to marry again? I could not have believed it of him!’

‘Oh no, no! you are misunderstanding me! He quite faced the possibility. I tried to stop him; the words sounded so shocking by his death-bed. But he said that he knew I should.

Then the prohibition was a special one?’

The young man’s voice sounds suddenly cold. She has covered her face with her hands — those hands from which, in the severity of her mourning, all rings save the emblem of her late bondage are stripped.

‘Yes.’

‘It applied to one particular person?’

‘Yes.’

‘Whom he mentioned by name?’

‘Yes.’

It is clear that that unnamed name is as little of a secret to the one as to the other of the young people. Again they walk on a few paces, she slowly and reluctantly uncovering her face again.

‘I did not know that he had had a suspicion of it.’

‘Nor I.’

‘Had he known it long?’

‘All these years.’

‘Who told him?’

‘Nobody.’

‘How did he learn it, then?’

‘By the evidence of his own ears. He was behind there’—just indicating with an eye-flash the ponderous yew screen—‘on the night of—on that night.’

‘Listening?’

‘Yes ; but quite unintentionally—quite by accident.’ After a moment she adds in a low voice, as if paying a necessary tribute to the dead : ‘Even if it had been deliberately, he would have been quite within his right.’

‘And he never afterwards gave any indication of what he had discovered?’

‘Never.’ Again she adds a remorseful

rider to her negative: 'How he must have suffered!'

It is impossible for the young man to gain-say this.

'You suffered, too.'

'Yes, I did.'

There is a source of relief in the affirmation.

'And Miss Etheredge?'

'She never had the smallest suspicion.'

'The will came upon her like a clap of thunder?'

'Yes.'

'Did she — did she ask you — what it meant?'

'Yes.'

'You *did* not tell her?'

'No; I thought it would be a cruelty.'

'It would have been *suicide*.'

'I suppose so; but I think it would have been a relief.'

He makes a horrified movement.

‘For God’s sake do not let yourself go to that idea! As things stand, no one need ever know.’

She shakes her head.

‘Too late !

“ Secret de deux,
Secret des dieux ;
Secret de trois,
Secret de tous.”

Have you ever heard that ?’

‘But who are the *trois* ?’

In answer, she puts the forefinger of her right hand against the thumb of her left.

‘First there is you.’

‘And you think that *I* am likely to *colporter* such news ?’

‘My senses have not left me quite so completely as to believe that. But, still, there is *you*.’

‘Who else ?’

Mrs. Etheredge turns her head almost

entirely aside before she replies, not very audibly :

‘There is the whole of *his* family’—it is clear that the possessive pronoun does not now refer to her husband—‘the Mileses.’

‘It would scarcely be to *their* interest to blacken you.’

The implication dyes her in blushes, and her head is still averted as she murmurs :

‘They cannot be very fond of me, for being the cause of the banishment for five years out of the neighbourhood—out of their lives—of their nearest and dearest.’

Clarendon gives his shoulders an irritable shake, as if he would like to contradict her, but does not. After awhile his companion recovers complexion enough to look straight before her again and resume her computation.

‘Then there is Lady Barnes. If you remember, she was staying here at the time.’

‘And you made a confidante of *her*?’

‘No, I did not. But I know that she guessed—more than guessed.’

‘You have not kept up any communication with her, have you?’

‘None.

‘You do not even know where she lives?’

‘I heard that she had gone to California, to stay with a niece or cousin ; but that was more than a year ago.’

Clarendon draws a breath that sounds one of relief.

‘Then, I trust that she may be put out of the reckoning.’

Again they walk on a few paces. The adviser’s eyes are on the ground, and his forehead plaited into an anxious frown.

‘I fear that at best yours is a situation that will require the most extraordinary discretion.’

‘And you think that I shall be indiscreet?’

There is hurt surprise in her voice, and he answers with an irritability obviously pain-born :

‘Pray do not put words into my mouth.’

She is looking away from him, her eyes fixed upon the hanging prism of a peacock’s tail sunning himself on the yew hedge, and out-shining the Monbretias, hollyhocks, and gladioli massed in stalwart bloom beneath him. In the thickness of the yew a little seat, just big enough for two, is cut. For five years she has never passed it without recalling how she sat there one summer day by a man’s side. The thrill of that memory helps to shake her voice, as she says :

‘You must not quarrel with me now in these last days of our eight years’ companionship—it is eight years, is not it?’

‘Almost to a day.’

‘Yes ; I remember the Monbretias were

out. I had never seen any before. I asked you their name.'

There is a pensive lag in her tones.

'I am sure I was not able to tell you.'

'No ; you answered very shortly, "I have no knowledge of botany." How determined you were to dislike me !'

'Yes.'

'What made us first friends ?' asks she, with a retrospective curiosity that seems to give ease to her heavier thoughts ; 'the discovery of our third-cousinship ?'

'I do not think it was that.'

'That helped ; and then we began to be sorry for one another—you for me, and I for you.'

'You had no need ! I was very happy.'

There is the harshness of emotion in his never very musical voice ; but, carried away upon the stream of her recollections, she does not notice it.

‘Then I helped you with your Chroniclers—the Old French, I mean ; after that you began to think there might be something in me.’

She laughs slightly, and he as slightly echoes what can scarcely be called her mirth.

‘And so, *de fit en aiguille*, we grew into brother and sister.’ She pauses, and then adds in a much lower key : ‘Yet even now it is inconceivable that after only three short years you should have gained such influence over me, that you should have dared—that I should have let you——’

She breaks off, quite unable to proceed ; and it is not a theme on which he can help her.

By this time their feet have carried them a little away from the scene of her tragedy, and after a while she is able, with a glance thrown over the basking pleasaunces, to recover palpitating speech.

‘But for you, I should have said good-bye to all this five years earlier.’

‘You are glad now that you did not?’

‘Yes.’

In her assent, so far as it is audible, there is undoubtedly the awe of a past peril; is it only to his tormented ear that there is also regret? It is a subject which, as both feel, cannot be further pursued; yet several moments pass before either is capable of beginning another.

‘Of course you know that, if you choose, you have the right to stay here for six months.’

‘But I do not choose.’

‘I thought you would not.’

She looks round at her lost glories with an eye that tries, not quite unsuccessfully, to be all Spartan.

‘Since I am banished, I shall feel an intruder till my sentence is carried out.’

‘You do not think of going abroad for a while?’

‘For nine days—until the inevitable speculations as to what I can have done are over? No, I do not.’

‘You will leave this neighbourhood?’

Her answer is given with the tartness of a naturally quick temper and overworked nerves :

‘Such a question is scarcely marked by your usual acuteness. Is it likely that I should settle down in one of my own lodges?’

‘Have you got even as far as deciding which will be wisest for you—town or country?’

She shakes her head.

‘Where one has all the world to choose from, how *is* one to decide? I suppose I could not afford London?’

‘A thousand a year does not go very far there.’

‘And the country in winter would be dreary.’

He looks so lugubrious at this statement of her possibilities that, as in the case of his increase of fortune, she takes topsy-turvily the rôle of consoler.

‘People who live in large houses always inhabit their smallest rooms. I shall probably end by preferring a cottage.’

But his vicarious disappointment is too new for him to give her the solace of agreeing with her.

‘I am afraid that the process of contraction is never a pleasant one.’

‘I do not think I shall mind that.’

There is a steady pluck in the answer, and through the surface darkness of her face some thought sends a light suddenly gleaming. It is gone again in an instant, but it silences him. She turns the tables upon him with quick, anxious sympathy. --

‘And you ? What have you decided upon ?’

‘Nothing ?’

‘Are we both equally adrift ?’

‘My sisters, who live at Richmond, have asked me to join housekeeping with them. They are not well off. They say it would be a help to them.’

‘And you will accept ?’

‘I do not know. It depends.’

She does not ask him upon what, and her rejoinder, ‘I suppose you could work the Museum and the Record Office pretty well from there,’ is almost as spiritless as his own statement.

Their steps have led them into another walk, whence the full length of the house’s garden front is visible—the great main block, the far-stretching wings, the classic *Perrou*, with its double-flighted stairs. The two friends sit down on a convenient bench, and both stare straight before them at the familiar

façade. Mrs. Etheredge's emotions are the first to find expression.

‘Poor little old woman!’ she says in a tone of unaffected compassion. ‘What *will* she do with it?’

He rounds upon her with an indefensible snappishness that she yet does not resent.

‘And what will you do without it?’

‘You mean, without all that it represents?’

She knits her brows intensely, as if in the difficult effort to realize the imminent change in her lot. Then she answers him with a smile that, if a little pale, is not a put-on one.

‘It will be a “reverse of fortune” with a vengeance. But I do not think I shall mind it.’

‘I suppose you say so only out of kindness to me?’

‘No, I do not. I really mean it.’

Once again that flying gleam disperses the shadows on her face, and he looks away.

•

After a pause of several minutes' duration Mrs. Etheredge resumes :

' I have been running over in my mind all the things I shall have to give up.'

' Well ?'

' There is only one that I do not know how I am going to do without.'

' Which is that ?'

She bends a pair of troubled blue eyes full of open, sisterly affection upon him.

' *You.*'

His answer is not very ready, but when it comes it is an exceedingly quiet one.

' I suppose I have become a habit.'

' After having becked and called you for eight years, how *am* I to get on without you ?'

It is a question that the object of it can scarcely respond to without fatuity, and he does not make the attempt. She ruminates for a few moments, and then says :

' Is it absolutely necessary ?'

‘Is what absolutely necessary?’

‘That we should go out of each other’s lives?’

‘I—I do not understand.’

‘I mean, if you decide to settle at Richmond, why should not I settle there, too, in a little villa near you—all?’

For answer he gives a slight start, followed by: ‘You might not like my sisters.’

‘I am not very apt to dislike people. But would it matter if I did?’

‘If you lived next door?’

At that she bends her brows, and there is a tinge of upbraiding in her voice.

‘I suppose that I am going to have a bad time. I see that you think so. Is it very wonderful that I should wish to keep within reach of the one person who is warranted to stand by me?’

At this expression of confidence he flashes her a look of troubled gratitude.

‘You are literally the only human being I have to turn to. I have never needed you as I shall now ; and you know ’—with a look of flushed appeal—‘ that I always take your advice.’

‘I know that you took it—*once*.’

‘If I took it *then*, am I ever likely to neglect it?’

There is no one near, yet with one consent their voices have dropped to a half-whisper.

‘If you do not come to my help now, it will indeed be a new departure.’

The young man looks round miserably.

‘The whole thing is a new departure.’ Then, with an apparent tug at the rein of his emotions, he adds : ‘Possibly as a temporary expedient Richmond might answer. And’—more to himself than her—‘of course it would be only temporary.’

The platitude with which she answers comes on a wave of rose-colour.

‘What is there in the whole world that is not temporary?’

* * * * *

The message that greets her on her return to the house, to the effect that her sister-in-law would be glad to speak to her, is enough to wipe off any red that may linger on her cheeks, and it is with a very blanched face that she turns to obey it. ‘As she does so, Clarendon’s voice sounds low and urgent in her ear.

‘Are you to be depended on?’

‘For what?’

‘Not to say or do anything suicidal.’

‘But if she puts a point-blank question?’

‘You must evade it.’

‘Tell a lie?’

‘If necessary, yes.’

She gives an agitated head-shake, and, to avoid further importunities, runs up the first flight of marble stairs. His voice pur-

sues her, anxiety overcoming his habitual caution.

‘You promised to be guided by my advice.’

‘There is no promise without reservations.’

With this cold comfort she leaves him, her run dropping into a walk as soon as she is out of reach of his voice, since to the interview ahead of her there can certainly be no motive for hurrying.

Miss Etheredge’s rooms are of her own choosing, having once been the nurseries and schoolroom of her impossible childhood and unbelievable youth ; but, like herself, they have a north aspect, and never without a sinking of the spirit has Jane entered their precincts. That same sinking, a thousand times intensified, now assails her as she finds herself in the dull, rectilinear enceinte. By mutual consent neither of the women attempts any repetition of the frosty kiss

with which they have daily sealed the lovelessness of their relations.

‘Will not you sit down?’

The visitor silently complies, and there is a pause, as of a Judge about to pronounce sentence. The prisoner is thankful when the voice of her arraigner—she is surely more than a dispassionate Judge—breaks it.

‘When we last met, I was not in a fit state to discuss—to ask an explanation of the—the news I had just heard. I scarcely know what I said.’

‘You did not say much. I think’—with an accent of irrepressible pity breaking through the controlled trembling of her voice—‘that you were almost stunned.’

‘Possibly. It was a great shock.’

She puts one veined hand up to her high, narrow forehead, but instantly removes it again, as if the action were a confession of weakness, and resumes :

‘To-day I am perfectly capable of hearing, of understanding—what you may have to say.’

‘I have nothing to say.’

‘Nothing to say?’

‘Nothing.’

The determined, low negative has an effect not unlike Cordelia’s, for through the resolute, iced civility of the questioner’s voice there pierces a spear of indignation.

‘Have you no explanation to offer?’

‘None—except that he had a perfect right to dispose of his property as he chose.’

‘Undoubtedly he had!’—very sharply, as if to defend the memory of the dead against any potential aspersion—‘but that he should have taken such a course without adequate reason, nothing will ever make me believe. In every action of his life he was absolutely just!’

‘I think he was.’

The acquiescence seems to take its hearer

by surprise, and for a moment she keeps a startled silence.

‘Then you acknowledge that he had adequate reason?’

‘What he thought adequate reason — yes.’

‘But you deny its adequacy?’

For a moment the accused hesitates, the upbraiding shade of her adviser rising in prohibition before her. Then she replies, low but steadily : ‘No, I do not.’

The admission takes the power of speech temporarily from her to whom it is addressed, and the clock that has ticked away the elder woman’s gray life is for several moments the only speaker. Then—

‘You are determined to give no explanation?’

‘I have none but what I have already given.’

‘Yet you know why he altered his will?’

‘Yes.’

The other darts a strange look at her, and with hands grasping each other behind her back, and down-bent head, begins to stride up and down the room. After two or three turns she pulls up suddenly opposite her sister-in-law.

‘But why at the last moment? What did that mean? Had anything—any new fact about you come to his knowledge?’

‘Nothing.’

Again the elder woman’s head sinks on her breast, and again that wave of mastering pity rolls over the soul of the disinherited, prompting her to stretch out her hand and touch the knotted fingers clutching one another so convulsively.

‘Why seek any other explanation than that he thought you more worthy to be his heir than me? I am far from disagreeing with him. There was nobody in the world who loved him as you did.’

‘You talk as if it were matter of congratulation,’ says the other rudely; but such a world of agony enwraps the anger and incivility of her words that Jane involuntarily bows her head. ‘*Congratulation* upon having lost him, and been left saddled with the hideous incubus of all *this*.’

She stands at the window sombrely looking out, not speaking again until she has Spartanly curbed in the transient outbreak of her woe.

‘As I was ten years his senior, it would have seemed probable that I should go before him.’

‘Yes.’

Another pause.

‘When I last saw him—but, as you are aware, during the last few days I was not allowed to enter his room—he seemed to me to be in perfect possession of his senses.’

‘He was so.’

‘I believe that the approach of death often obscures the intellect and warps the judgment, but in his case the mind seemed to be as clear as in his days of fullest health.’

The widow bends her head, with a gesture, slight yet most emphatic, of assent.

‘If it were not so—if there had been any signs of wandering at the last——’

‘There were none.’

The questioner turns away with a look of dull disappointment, and once again the tearless wretchedness of her eyes surveys through the window her unwelcome possessions.

‘The world will say that he was grossly unjust—that his death falsified the whole tenor of his life.’

‘I do not think that you need fear that.’

Her tone is still one of reverent compassion. The other walks heavily back from the window, and stands for a few moments before her young sister-in-law, surveying her

with a dumb intensity that she finds hard to bear. Miss Etheredge's speech, when it does come, seems scarcely relevant.

‘We have never been fond of each other.’

‘I suppose not.’

‘But I have always found you a rigorously truthful woman.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Even now, with this great slur cast upon you, if you can tell me that you believe that he was not himself—that he was the victim of some dying delusion—I will believe you.’

For a moment, not out of any regard for her own interests, but out of pure pity, Jane hesitates. It is only for a moment.

‘I cannot tell you so. He was perfectly himself. And he was not unjust. He did what he thought right. And do not be afraid; it is not he who will be blamed.’

CHAPTER IV.

‘ NAKED came I into the world, and naked go I. out.’

Mrs. Etheredge says over these words aloud to herself in the brougham which takes her to the station, on her final departure from her home. She is not quite sure whether they form a text, and, if so, whether she has quoted them accurately ; and the doubt causes her a teasing, superficial worry. Another phrase succeeds them in her brain, while through the blood-red autumn trees her eyes follow the ever-lessening bulk of the great stone house, standing magnificent and mournful—houses have an unexplained way

of showing outside the melancholy that is within them—in the October sunshine.

‘Expelled for misconduct.’ That is the second sentence, but it does not rise to her lips. Her look notes each disappearing landmark. There is the *porte-cochère*, under which she had been drawn by tenants as a bride—a big baby of seventeen; there are the windows of the room where she had refused her husband’s dying request, and where, without any sign of forgiveness, he had yielded up the ghost; there—this elbow in the drive, endlessly serpentine through the Park, gives her just a glimpse of them—are those other windows behind which is sitting his heiress, dwindled with grief and overdone with distasteful toil.

The heiress had kissed the disinherited at parting. It was a little hard ceremony, but the exile is glad of it. It seems as if her supplanter were reluctantly unable quite to

endorse the ban under which she is being driven forth. The servants, too, have obviously not been glad at the change of authority; and though the goodwill of a large establishment is a fluid property not comparable to the solid liking which often binds together a small household, yet to one departing bare and decried it seems better than nothing.

Clarendon looks on in rueful silence, as she begins at once, with unrepining common-sense, to cut her coat according to her cloth.

‘You will not even take your maid with you?’

Mrs. Etheredge smiles.

‘That she may corrupt my “general’s” mind with high tales of the steward’s room?—hardly!’

The difficulty and labour of a *déménagement* is in proportion to the amount to be *déménagé*; and as Mrs. Etheredge has

naught but herself, the girlish nothings she brought with her eight years ago, and such pretty trifles as she has bought during that period with her own pin-money, to remove, her exodus is accomplished without difficulty ere October is more than halfway through his crimson and umber course.

‘Naked go I out,’ repeats she once more, as what she knows to be the last glimpse of the palace where she has reigned meets her dethroned eyes. And that chapter of her life is closed.

* * * * *

‘Richmond is only a village, but it is one of the prettiest villages near London.’ This 1820 résumé of the royal borough’s charms has, alas ! now only a historical value. But, as in the case of a handsome woman, whose face partially survives the shipwreck of her figure, so, though all other beauties of the little town have vanished under the sordid

advance of brick and mortar, the view from the Terrace still smiles as in the last-century days when the neighbouring ladies used to have their coffee-cups and card-tables set out on summer evenings in the rustic privacy of its elm-tree shade.

Upon that view the tiny furnished house taken for Mrs. Etheredge by her husband's late secretary—his one consolation is that she is still completely unscrupulous in her calls upon his services—looks. He has been on the doorstep to welcome her, anxiously scanning her face for the fall of disgust and disappointment that he expects to see there ; and her 'What a dear little house!' in a voice so cheerful that he is glad that no one but the new parlourmaid hears it, overpays him—as, indeed, it never occurs to her that it should not—for his pains.

He spends almost the whole of the two following days with her, pushing about

chairs and tables, dismounting intolerable family portraits, replacing them by pretty mezzos and water-colours of her own, strewing *bibelots* over occasional tables, and generally charing.

It is after he has left her on the second day that, a further improvement in the treatment of a wall having occurred to her, she recalls the step-ladder, and is mounting it with hammer and nails, when she becomes aware that two neat, tailor-made young ladies, ushered in under the names of Miss Clarendon and Miss Mabella Clarendon, are upon her.

‘ You are Willy’s sisters !’ she says, holding out a hand to each, and looking welcomingly at them with her full blue eyes.

‘ He said he thought you would receive us.’

Something in the answer or in the expression of the two faces before her gives Mrs. Etheredge a sudden shy feeling that

she herself is looking in better repair than her visitors had expected to find her, or than she has any business to look.

‘Of course, I am not seeing people in general,’ she says gravely, yet with no attempt at a *figure de circonstance*. ‘But you are different; you are relations.’

‘It is very good of you to say so.’

The turn of the phrase makes Mrs. Etheredge feel the distance of the kinship she has claimed, and her own next sentence smacks more of formality.

‘Your brother has been with me nearly all day, helping me to get settled. I do not know what I should have done without him.’

‘He has been with you nearly all day? Oh, that explains——’

‘Explains what?’

‘His having thrown over an engagement in London.’

‘He never mentioned one to me.’

‘He would not, if he thought you wanted him. He is always like that.’

It is hard to say whether compunction at her own selfishness, or annoyance at having a character explained to her which she had always supposed to understand rather better than her own, is the leading factor in the annoyance that colours Mrs. Etheredge’s next speech.

‘I trust it was nothing of importance?’

‘Oh, I dare say not. It was only to meet a French antiquary, who is over from Paris for a few days, and who is an authority on his own hobby, the famous *Chronicles*, which no doubt you have heard of.’

The tone of rather slighting amusement in which the elder girl speaks of her brother’s work is only partially successful in allaying her hearer’s remorse, and her ‘Oh, I do hope it did not matter!’ is so hearty as to call forth a polite ‘I am sure it did not.’

The alternative that it *did* is so extremely disagreeable to Mrs. Etheredge that with prompt philosophy she at once shelves it, and there is a slight pause of observation, the visitors' eyes cautiously pricing their surroundings, and the hostess more openly taking stock of them.

They are well-favoured young women, the younger one most so; and their armour-plated figures, whaleboned into fashionable slimness, and carefully restrained fringes, make them fully deserve the encomium, which to them would seem the highest possible, of 'looking all right.'

As she scans their faces, the question asks itself in Jane's mind, 'Have they heard about her? Do they know?' Something in their manner, a friendliness that is yet, till further information, afraid of being too friendly, makes the scale dip on the side of their doing so. There is a tinge of embarrassment

in the smile with which she excuses her scrutiny.

‘I am trying to trace a family likeness.’

Both hasten to disclaim :

‘Oh, we are neither of us in the least like Willy!’ the one adding, ‘I do not know who it is that he takes after,’ and the other, ‘We always tell him that he is a “sport.”’

‘I wish there were more such “sports,”’ cries Mrs. Etheredge, and has time to grow inwardly hot over the absurdity of her championship, and the look of civil surprise that it engenders in her hearers, before a new topic is found.

‘I hope you will like Richmond.’

‘I dare say I shall.’

‘No doubt you already know people here?’

‘Not a soul;’ adding hastily, since once again her visitors’ eyebrows rise, ‘That is one

of the reasons why I came here. I do not want to make many acquaintances just at present.'

'Of course not.'

There is a short polite pause for lugubrious recollection, broken by the younger girl.

'I am afraid you will not find it a cheap place.'

Then they *do* know. Her sister strangles a sigh.

'Rates and taxes are very high, and up here you have to pay twenty pounds a year extra for the view.'

'I do not grudge it,' says the new inhabitant stoutly, her eyes glancing through the open French window that gives upon the doll's balcony of her little upstairs drawing-room down upon the river's long course sliding past the green Ham walks and the gold-washed Ham trees.

‘It is all very well if one can let one’s house for August and September. If not——’

The unfinished sentence dies in another sigh. Jane looks at the speaker with a not unkindly curiosity. She knows, on their brother’s authority, how narrow have been their means ; and a pitying speculation as to how much of pinch and effort lies under their successfully achieved appearance of well-to-do all-rightness crosses her mind.

‘It is not only rent and taxes, but everything to eat is so dear,’ adds the younger sister. ‘One has to pay extravagantly for every sprig of parsley.’

It is the first time that the herb in question has presented itself to Mrs. Etheredge’s mind as a serious article of commerce ; and at her look of bewilderment, as she says, ‘But surely one can get through life without much parsley,’ they all laugh. The visitors, it is true, pull themselves up quickly, but the

slight touch of common hilarity has warmed the air enough for Jane to say with more friendly ease than before :

‘ You must not frighten me, for I mean to be very—I mean to like the place very much.’

The change in the turn of her phrase is due to the reappearance of the look of surprise on the features of both strangers, at sight of which she talks on a little confusedly :

‘ The park here must be an ideal place for bicycling. I have brought my bicycle. Did you see it in the hall? Of course I shall not ride just yet. But what a resource it is for people who have nothing else to depend upon but their own legs!’

‘ Cab-hire here is *ruinous!*’ replies Miss Clarendon, with a recurrence to her former disheartening strain ; while her sister adds, with an air of warmer sympathy than has yet been displayed by either :

‘ *How* you must miss your carriage!’

‘I have not begun to think about it,’ returns Jane, with a slight shake of her now capless fair head. ‘I do not mean to think about it.’

‘It is very difficult not to think about those kind of things ; and, as Mabella says, cab-hire *is ruinous* here.’

The persistent douche brought to bear upon her is beginning to tell on Mrs. Etheredge’s temper, and there is a little quickness in her next query :

‘If the place is so full of drawbacks, why do you live here?’

The other heaves a sigh.

‘One must be somewhere near London. House-rent there is, of course, prohibitive. One must keep in touch with people. Of course it is out of the question to be really in the “swim,” but we come in for a few things.’

Once again that sense of compassion steals

across the hearer's mind. She has not had much experience of the type, but it comes home to her now that among the many forms of martyrdom to which humanity is liable, that of the needy young woman, resolute to be 'smart,' is not the least.

'One has to be very careful as to what acquaintance one makes here. Such extraordinary kind of people come—people who flit in the middle of the night—do not they, Mabella?'

The younger sister assents, adding :

'We never call upon anybody unless we are asked, or unless we know all about them.'

'I hope that I come under both heads,' says Jane with a smile, but the turn of the sentence makes her vaguely uncomfortable. Do her visitors indeed know all about her?

'By-the-by,' cries the elder in a livelier

key, 'we have just been calling upon a lady who says that she has met you—stayed with you, I think.'

'*Met me! Stayed with me!*' The accent is certainly not one of pleasure.

'She has lately taken a house on Ham Common; her name is Lady Barnes.'

'What Lady Barnes?'

They look, or her guilty conscience tells her so, puzzled at the change in her voice, and both hasten at once to reassure her.

'Oh, she is all right. Her husband—she is a widow—was a brother of Lord Cardiff. It is so confusing when Honourables are made K.C.B.'s, is not it? But we looked her up. She is *quite* right.'

'How insufferably old mignonette smells!' cries Jane brusquely. 'I must really have it taken away.'

She jumps up to ring the bell, coming back more leisurely, and saying indifferently:

‘So Lady Barnes is living on Ham Common?’

‘Yes; she has just come back from a trip to California. If you are *really* going to throw away that mignonette, may I have it? It is perfectly fresh.’

‘Of course; but I am ashamed to offer it you.’

A few moments are occupied in drying the stalks of the libelled nosegay, and placing it with the contents of one or two other flower-glasses in Miss Clarendon’s hands. Then—

‘Lady Barnes was quite excited when she heard that you were living here. She said, “Give her my love, and ask her when I may come to see her.”’

Mrs. Etheredge has not sat down again, and an object in the roadway must have caught her attention, for her answer does not come at once. It is :

‘Does not she know that I am in deep—

(something makes her change the phrase)—
'that I am not seeing anyone at present?'

'I suppose she hoped you would make an exception in her favour.'

Jane does not rejoin, and it is with such obvious difficulty that she keeps her attention to the remarks next made her that in five minutes more the girls take leave, carrying with them not only the flowers, but a few yards of Indian stuff left lying on a sofa, and which they admire with enough energy to have it heartily and successfully pressed on their acceptance.

Their hostess sees their faultless backs with untold relief, since their departure leaves her free to ramp up and down her little drawing-room in the wild tumult of excitement that the news they have brought, and of which they so little know the bearing, has evoked. Lady Barnes living within a couple of miles of her! Lady Barnes—one

of the few, the very few, who *know* ! Is she glad or sorry at the tidings ? Her Mentor will be in despair. But *she* ? Prudence would bid her regret the unlooked-for and unlikely coincidence ; but prudence takes no count of her famine for the sound of his name. From Lady Barnes she is sure to hear it, since that lady had warmly admired him ; may possibly hear news of him—of what happy latitude holds him ; so as to be able to picture to herself in some measure what sky will be over him, what earth under his feet, when he hears that she is free.

The glow of these thoughts still illumines the face which she turns to Clarendon when he arrives next morning to offer his services. Her radiance gives him an undefined uneasiness.

‘ So my sisters have been to call upon you ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘Well, how did you get on?’

‘Very well indeed.’

‘I told you that I thought you would not like them.’

‘But I did like them. And what wonderful housekeepers they seem!’

A slight cloud of annoyance crosses the young man’s features.

‘They have always had to make sixpence do the work of a shilling, poor souls! If you had tried it, you would find that it is not easy to do that through a lifetime without damage to the character.’

‘But I never said or dreamed that their characters were damaged because they know the price of parsley; your mind jumps like a kangaroo!’—flushing with vexation.

‘If we are going to quarrel, let us begin upon the dining-room at once. Have you decided to have “The Tapestry Weavers” over the chimney-piece?’

‘I *did* like your sisters ; only they seemed to think—I gathered the impression that they thought — I was looking *too* well—well-er than I had any right to look.’

She turns the perfect healthfulness of her eyes, with whites blue as bird eggs, inquiringly upon him. He answers slowly but truthfully :

‘You look *happier* than is usual, perhaps.’

‘And why should not I look happy?’ cries she, with a voice and eye of revolt. ‘Have not I paid for the right?’ with an expressive glance round her. ‘Well, I am so glad that I have paid ; it was quite right that I should. And now I am starting afresh—a new woman in a brand-new world.’

‘A New Woman?’—dryly. ‘I hope not.’

‘A new woman, not *the* New Woman!’

Despite their close friendship, he looks at her with an imperfect sympathy.

‘Shall we begin upon the dining-room?’

‘Not this moment. I have something to say to you first.’ She pauses confusedly, then adds more easily, changing the trend of her sentence, ‘I have a bone to pick with you.’

‘Leave it unpicked.’

‘What did you mean by throwing up an important engagement to come and char for me? Is it irremediable? Is your savant gone? Will he come back soon? Is he a great authority? What is his name? Have I ever heard it?’

‘It did not——’ he begins, and checks himself, seeing plainly that she has forgotten to expect an answer to her string of questions, and is struggling with the difficulty of introducing some theme of far keener interest than his overlooked sacrifice.

‘I have something else to say. Did you hear—did your sisters mention to you who it was that they called upon yesterday, besides me?’

‘No ; I have scarcely seen them, and they do not often tell me of their engagements.’

‘It was—Lady Barnes.’

‘*Lady Barnes !*’

‘Yes, *Lady Barnes !* She has taken a house on Ham Common.’

The dismay on his face exceeds even what she had expected.

‘What an extraordinary piece of ill-luck !’

The young woman turns aside, and begins to give little nervous taps with a hammer she holds in her hand upon a table near her.

‘She wants to come and see me !’

‘Of course you need not receive her. Your deep mourning——’ He stops, shying as she herself had done before, at the hypocrisy of the phrase, substituting : ‘She must know that you are not going out.’

‘Of course she must’—after a moment, still tapping and still with bent head. ‘How

long do you think it ought to be before I begin to see people ?’

He pauses.

‘Have not you come here on purpose to escape them ?’

‘But, you see, it is impossible.’

He does not see it, but neither does he tell her so, and she reiterates her query :

‘How soon do people generally begin to see their friends ?’

‘I suppose it is a good deal a matter of feeling.’

‘Or convention !’ she flashes at him ; then, seeing him look pained, hurries on : ‘You know quite well that I do not want to do anything unseemly. But you must know, too, that with such things in the past—and with the future—the future——’ She covers her face with her hands. By-and-by, as he stands palely waiting, she finishes her broken

sentence: 'You must know that it cannot be good or safe to be quite, *quite* alone.'

As he still awaits without interruption the ebb of her flood-tide of speech, she pursues:

'When I have finished arranging this cupboard'—with a wave that indicates her limited domain—'what is there left for me to do but sit down with my hands before me?'

'You are not of the kind that ever sits down with its hands before it.'

'I have left all my work, like everything else, behind me,' she says with an accent of momentary sadness. 'But'—more brightly—'I might go on helping you with yours. Shall we appear as joint authors on the title-page?'

He smiles in spite of himself.

'We are not within sight of the title-page yet.'

'But we shall be if we work steadily all

.

through the winter. You might come here daily, or, if more convenient as to books and references, I could go daily to your house, and we might work together at the Museum.'

'It sounds very delightful.'

'And, unlike most delightful things, it is perfectly feasible.'

He is not quite of her opinion as to that, and chides himself for the stupid pang he feels at her looking at him so wholly as an old woman as to make the suggestion.

CHAPTER V.

THE work of the morning is ended, the worst of the hireling pictures in the dining-room dismounted and replaced, and Clarendon is just gone, refusing all offers of luncheon.

‘I believe you think I cannot afford it,’ his hostess has said with a half-piqued smile, when the door opens and he reappears. ‘You have thought better of it!’ cries she joyfully. ‘I am so glad! And there is nothing but a cutlet and some risotto. *They* will not land me in the Bankruptcy Court.’

‘No, thanks, I will not stay.’

He pauses awkwardly, so awkwardly that she says rallyingly :

‘Did you come back to tell me so?’

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘I am afraid that I may offend you.’

She laughs, but with a slight ring of apprehension.

‘It will not be for the first time by many.’

‘I—I want you to do the best for yourself.’

She lifts her eyebrows.

‘Yes?’

‘And just now you have very difficult cards to play.’

‘Yes.’

His manner is more and more confused, and she does nothing to help him. Yet he is clearly resolved to say whatever he has come back to deliver himself of.

‘You yourself told me just now of the impression you thought you made on my sisters of—of—looking *too*——’

He stops, leaving her to fill in the missing

adjective 'to taste'; but her only answer is dead red silence.

'Would it be possible—just for the present—just while you are out of doors, and liable to ill-natured comments, to—to—look a little less——'

'*Radiant*,' suggests she, with great distinctness of utterance, though face and neck are in a blaze. 'Thank you for the hint. I will try.'

Her adviser suffers grave doubts as to the wisdom of his admonishment, which, with humanity's usually faulty logic, he had thought must be right because it was so disagreeable, while he runs hastily, and this time finally, down Mrs. Etheredge's stairs. Nor, could he see her standing indignantly surveying herself in a pier-glass which has been too integral a part of her drawing-room's decorations to be improved away, would his confidence be much heightened.

‘My husband has been dead only two months, and I am to try and not look quite so radiant,’ she says in a low voice. Then aloud, while she watches the flushed image in the glass repeating the words with her: ‘How is it to be managed? A few more visits from my chosen friend will be the best recipe.’ She laughs angrily. ‘Instead of insulting, he ought to admire me for the pluck with which I am bearing such a reverse. There is not one woman in ten thousand that would have shown an equal courage.’

She makes a long pause, while her blue eyes grow soft at an unspoken thought, the thought that not one woman in ten thousand could have such a hope to support her under paltry material losses as she. The tender reverie that this reflection brings in its train makes her forget both her wrath and the fact that the risotto which her Mentor had refused to share with her is growing cold. When at

last she remembers to eat her luncheon, she does so in a pacified spirit, and to the tune of the reflection: 'He did it clumsily, but it was well meant; and he is quite right. I will keep my veil down.'

* * * * *

'If Lady Barnes calls, you can perfectly well say "Not at home,"' has been another piece of advice tendered—and not so hesitatingly as the more delicate counsel—by Clarendon, and his client has acquiesced, 'Perfectly.' Yet 'when the trial comes, though at the moment her assent has been quite sincere, she does nothing of the kind. This may be because the apprehended evil falls upon her so much sooner than is expected, since Lady Barnes, letting no grass grow under her feet, rings Mrs. Etheredge's bell on the very next day, and—the new parlourmaid having received no orders to the contrary—is admitted.

Jane has only just returned from a solitary walk, and has not yet laid aside her bonnet, whose senseless weeper—last survival of the barbaric plumes and mutes of fifty years ago—floats in odious amplitude down her back. Her appearance, seen in rear, is all that even Clarendon could desire.

‘I knew that you would receive *me*!’ cries the visitor, swimming confidently in, with both hands outstretched. ‘*How* delightful to meet again! and in *what* different surroundings!’

There is no tone of conventional regret in her voice, nor any affectation of thinking it necessary to suppose low spirits in the damask-rose-faced, lugubrious-garbed figure before her, who, half shocked, half relieved, at her visitor’s cheerful address, stands silent, with hands prisoned in the stranger’s clasp, while her cheek-roses rapidly change sides from York to Lancaster and back again.

‘How strange it is to see you in these monstrous anachronisms!’ pursues the lady in a key of almost indignant wonder, indicating her weeds. ‘And yet how beautiful you look in them!’

To an undoubtedly handsome woman direct compliments are often distasteful, nor is Jane an exception to the rule. But in the present case she is scarcely aware of the syrup poured over her. The timbre of her visitor’s voice, her graceful, trailing walk, and tall, faded prettiness, seem to take her bodily up out of time and place, and set her down on that plot of both where they had last met.

Surely this is not her new square of Oriental carpet on which her feet are set, but the live, velvet green of the circular garden at Etheredge. This is not her freshly whitewashed, humble ceiling above her head, but the turquoise triumphal arch

of July sky which five years ago the past locked into its jewel-case.

She must remain stricken longer than she knows, for presently she hears Lady Barnes uttering a request to be allowed to sit down.

‘You know that I never was very good at standing.’

Jane finds herself on a chair, and the first thing that brings her really to herself is the action of her weeper, which, being inadvertently sat upon, promptly avenges itself by nearly pulling off the back of her head. Her new friend looks at her compassionately.

‘Is not it horrid? mine always did that.’

This allusion to the sufferings entailed by the loss of her K.C.B. seems to set both their spirits more at liberty. The elder rests her long elbow gracefully on her long knee, and, with her head leant sideways on her hand, scans Mrs. Etheredge at admiring leisure.

‘And so you have come here to breathe, to rest, to get away for just a while from the burden of a big establishment? There is nothing so restful for a few weeks as a little house.’

Mrs. Etheredge gives a slight start of dismay. It is clear that in this case the visitor does not know.

‘With me it is not for a few weeks; it is for a lifetime.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I thought you had probably heard.’

‘Heard what? I have only just returned to England.’

‘That’—the young woman pulls herself together, and brings it out firmly—‘that I have no longer anything to do with Etheredge; it belongs to my sister-in-law.’

‘Your sister-in-law?’

‘Yes; my husband’s sister. He left everything to her.’ Then, dreading a too

candid outburst of disapproval of the action of the dead, she adds the formula whose corners have been rubbed off with much use : 'He had a perfect right to do what he pleased with his own.'

'Men always think that they have a perfect right to be as unjust and tyrannous as they please in their lifetime,' says the other, her languid, soft voice giving point to the axiom ; 'but they sometimes have a glimmer of posthumous justice.'

She accompanies this remark with a look of anxious affection that turns it into a question—a question whose only answer is murmured with averted head.

'It would have been a great burden to me.'

'Then you are cut out altogether ?'

There is such a fervour of reprobation in Lady Barnes' tone that the widow, to stem its torrent, blurts out a rash reply.

‘It was my own doing. I might have had everything, if——’

She stops dead short, with the flashing thought of how much further she is going than is necessary; and of how deeply Clarendon would disapprove.

‘If what?’ There is a pregnant silence, broken by the stranger’s seizing both Jane’s hands and saying, ‘You need not explain; he annexed some monstrous condition—some prohibition. I understand. Oh! do not I understand? And you refused? How *beautiful!*’ An added pressure upon the fingers, which in vain try to free themselves, emphasizes the adjective.

‘There was nothing beautiful about it,’ says the other grimly, and struggling for freedom; ‘and, indeed, if you do not mind, I had rather not discuss the subject.’

Her visitor releases her with one last squeeze.

‘Of course we will not. We will never mention it again. But, whatever else you forbid me, you cannot prevent my giving you my *warm* admiration, my *tender* sympathy.’

There is a heated pause ; nor, when the visitor once again takes up the thread of talk, does she seem quite obedient to her hostess’ behest.

‘How often I have thrummed over the old tune in my head ! Gone over that time, I mean. My visit *really* lasted only ten days, but in memory it covers a much larger area.’

‘Does it?’

‘Quite lately—within the last few months—I have had it vividly recalled to me.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Yes ; by one of my fellow-guests.’

It might seem natural to ask which, but Mrs. Etheredge’s curiosity does not appear

to be excited. She has stooped to introduce herself to a little angel in blue and silver in the shape of a tiny Yorkshire terrier, who, very much over-dressed for the morning, with a knot of pink ribbons in his hair, has followed his mistress into the room.

‘You know that I have been out to California?’

‘I heard so.’

‘To stay with my niece, who has made a foolish love-marriage upon nothing; at least, people called it foolish. *I* never did.’

‘Yes?’

‘One talks of being five miles from a lemon; but out there lemons are the only things one is near. One’s next-door neighbour is thirty miles off.’

‘So I have been told.’

‘He rode over one Sunday with the friend at whose farm he was staying. *I was* so astonished to see him.’

‘To see whom?’

‘Mr. Miles.’

Jane had thought she knew what name was coming ; yet its arrival has the effect of a sounding blow on the back, robbing her of wind, and giving her stars before the eyes instead. It cannot really be half an hour before she hears an arid voice, which she believes to issue from her own throat, say :

‘Oh, indeed ! and—and—was he quite well?’

‘Magnificently well. At least’—with an afterthought—‘as far as bodily health was concerned.’

The thrill of the topic is making the hearer forget the vain effort to affect indifference.

‘Is he changed at all—in looks, I mean?’

‘He is filled out and bronzed. Oh, but bronzed ! so much so that his hair is lighter than his face. I do not know how you feel,

but that to me always gives such a superbly manly look.'

Mrs. Etheredge had not thought that her memory needed quickening, yet the picture of blond virility thus summoned up gives that faculty such an overpowering fillip that once again the little friend of man is her resource ; and the pretty innocent takes her stooping over him, and parting the silver hair that falls over his eyes, as a well-meant though needless civility.

'We had a great, *great* deal of talk. I think that I was rather a comfort to him in the wilderness. I was *so* sorry for him.'

She pauses, shifting the position of elbow and hand, as if hesitating as to how much further she dare step on the ticklish ground before her.

The hearer is acutely conscious of this balancing scrutiny, and, divided between a puny wish to stop her and a raging desire

to hear more, fabricates a voice and a question.

‘Had he taken root in the wilderness? made a home there?’

‘A *home*! Oh dear no! I do not know what his plans were—he did not know himself, poor fellow! He said he was at a loose end. He repeated the expression several times—“at a loose end.”’

The phrase is not a romantic one, but such a pregnancy of sentiment is thrown into it as dyes in painful blushes the younger woman—blushes which not even the memory of the two-months-dead husband behind her can pale. But though not mistress of her rebel blood, she after a moment retakes possession of herself, and it is not without dignity that she says :

‘At a loose end? We have most of us been that at one time or another.’

Lady Barnes feels that for the time the limit of her tether has been reached, and for

ten minutes talks with smooth fluency of *la pluie et le beau temps*. It is only just at parting that she has a rather bad relapse.

‘It is a long way off,’ she says, with apparent irrelevancy, ‘but they get all the papers out there.’

The discharge of this parting shot seems to have hastened the usually deliberate grace of her gait, yet she comes back from the reached door to say, with a meaning pressure of gray gloves and deprecating eyebeam :

‘You are not offended with me? You will come to see me? It is senseless to shut yourself quite up. *I* never did. It does them no good!’

With this philosophic allusion to their dead heroes, the older-established widow trails away. The younger is scarcely satisfied that her intruder is really gone, before she falls, face downwards, among the sofa cushions. Joy, equally with grief, must hide

its face ; and in Mrs. Etheredge's case the need is doubled by the consciousness—acute, though Clarendon is not present to tell her so—of how disgraceful a countenance, for one so lately bereaved, she would, if she lifted it, have to show. She is ashamed that even the hired furniture should see it. Ashamed, and yet how deeply, *deeply* joyful ! She had no more doubted her love's faithfulness than her own—faithful, though parted far as the pine from the palm, long as Gabriel from Evangeline. His image has always appeared before her, clad in its lonely fidelity.

But yet the months have run to years since she has had direct, or even indirect, news of him. She has made it a matter of conscience not to seek tidings of him ; and there has been a conspiracy of silence with regard to his name ; at least, so it has seemed to her starved ears. But now ! What full, what perfect justification has her belief re-

ceived! Clear as the light of heaven is it that he has gone mourning for her all these years. What can be clearer than the implications of her informant? At a loose end! Magnificently well in health. Pregnant limitation! He may be—is sick to death in the spirit. How much more she might have heard, if she had allowed herself! The reflection comes with a cloud of regret, but it is only a passing one, swept from before the sun of the one glorious truth. What need of more? In a paroxysm of thankfulness she falls on her knees, but instantly snatches herself up again. Is not it a sort of blasphemy to thank God for the fidelity of her lover when her husband is only two months dead? *Two months!* Will it never be more than two? will they never stretch to three—to four? never reach *twelve*?

* * * * *

Her arithmetic shocks her, but she cannot

get rid of it. It is still adding itself up in her head as she walks buoyantly through the buoyant air along the park towards Ham Gate, to return Lady Barnes' call. She has allowed an interval which seems to her tormentingly ample to elapse, but is not so assured of its appearing in the same light to other eyes, as not to be conscious of a wish that Clarendon, whom she presently sees bicycling in her direction along the road which runs parallel to the path she is pursuing, may fail to recognize her. But the tall, coal-black figure, with its Andalusian walk, is not one to escape notice, and in a moment her friend has jumped off, leant his machine against a tree, and joined her.

‘How I should enjoy a spin with you!’ she says. ‘But do not be afraid’—with a backward glance out of the tail of her eye at the weeper—‘my costume is hardly suitable.’

He gives her a look which may be merely sad, but in which she scents reproach.

‘I did not think that it mattered, having my veil up *here*, where there are so few people about ; and I love the touch of this crisp air on my face.’

As he does not answer, she adds playfully :

‘I shall make you try on one of these “lisse” abominations some day, that you may realize how it takes the edge off the universe.’

He smiles in spite of himself, as she pulls down the veil, and looks at him dimly lamentable through it.

‘You are taking a constitutional ?’

‘Ye-es. I want to walk off some of my vitality. Now there is nothing more to do to the house, I *am* frightfully short of a job ; and you have neglected me a good deal of late.’

‘You have not wanted me ? Not for anything special ?’

She dimples charmingly behind her crape.

‘Nothing beyond the perennial selfish need to make you my white nigger.’

He takes off his hat, and pushes the hair from his forehead.

‘I have been rather driven—working off a stiff article for an archæological journal which I had got behindhand with.’

‘Thanks to me.’

‘If you like to say so.’

‘You confess that I am a hindrance to you,’ returns she in an injured voice, ‘and yet you will not allow me to be a help. You throw cold water upon my plan of working steadily and systematically together every day at one or other of our houses.’

‘It was impracticable.’

‘Why impracticable?’

The young man turns half away without replying, pulling at an autumn-ruddy bracken fern frond, and it is a minute before the meaning of his silence dawns upon his com-

panion. When it does, 'You do not mean to imply,' she cries in a key of incredulous amusement, 'that Mrs. Grundy is going to interpose between *you* and *me* ?'

Her tone conveys how extravagant the suggestion appears to her, and once again, as at their last meeting, he winces. Nor does the glance of affectionate derision with which she takes in the insignificant slightness of his figure, the intelligent irregularity of his features, conduce to his making with much suavity the blunt admission :

'That is what I did mean to imply.'

The utterance hotly tinges his pale student face, but her complexion does not vary a jot from its pretty normal bloom.

'You are not telling me the real reason,' she says, with a careless disbelief. 'The real reason is that you think my collaboration would do you small credit. I rather agree with you there ; but I am still bent upon it.'

By the end of her sentence she has begun to be in motion again, and, with a nod of affected anger, leaves him standing under the hornbeams, a row of which at this spot vary with agreeable irrelevance the majestic monotony of oak.

She goes on her way rejoicing at having hidden from him her real goal, and, quickly reaching the charming dip that leads to Ham Gate, almost runs down the steep, bosky bank and emerges on the Common, which, gorsed, goosed, and fringed with comfortable eighteenth-century houses, recalls inevitably to the mind's eye that one across which John Gilpin fled, as presented by the pencil of the ever-to-be-lamented Caldecott.

Lady Barnes is at home, which on such an afternoon might seem unlikely ; but her hours are not those of other people. It is not she, however, who at first receives the visitor, but the Misses Clarendon, who, with hats off and

an air of old establishment, come forward to explain and excuse the hostess's absence.

'Lady Barnes will be here in a moment. She will be so pleased to see you! She has wondered several times whether you would return her call.'

The girls' manner is more unhesitatingly friendly than on their visit to herself, and it is coupled with such an air of being thoroughly well rooted in the soil in which she now finds them, that a mystified question crosses Jane's mind as to whether her memory can have deceived her in thinking that it was exactly a week ago that they had been first introduced to it. But the blizzard of dogs which now storms at her from all parts of the room, recruited by auxiliaries skirmishing in from the garden, and barking in every key, from that of the boom of a Cathedral bell to the squeak of a slate-pencil, banishes all other themes from her mind.

CHAPTER VI.

THE drawing-room was made for dogs, and not dogs for the drawing-room, would be Lady Barnes' thesis did she formulate it ; nor upon her entrance does she make any more effort to quell the clamour than if it represented—as to her ears it doubtless does—the civil greetings of the sons and daughters of a house to an arriving caller.

Seen in indoor dress, Lady Barnes looks even longer and more trailing than before, and with an even more obvious fashion of her own, and ignoring of the reigning mode in the old Italian lace thrown about her sentimental head. Through a little sea of

waving tails she makes her way to her guest.

‘I *am* glad! And now do sit down and be comfortable, and take off your bonnet, and that horrid thing! You will be driven to fly for refuge to a hat. I was almost at once.’

Jane is conscious that at this cavalier allusion to the ensign of her woe both girls unbutton their eyes a little; but apparently their conviction of Lady Barnes’ all-rightness is stout enough to make them swallow even this, and it is quite cordially that they now express to Mrs. Etheredge their regret at having been ‘out’ when she returned their visit.

‘We would have shown you Willy’s den,’ cry they affably, both saying the same thing in the same words at the same moment, as is the snare of those who live together. ‘It was a box-room, but it has turned into

quite a nice study for him—small, of course, but——’

‘Is there room for two in it?’ asks Jane, in whom shyness—and her Willy’s sisters make her feel intolerably shy—takes the form of nervous speech. ‘Because I am quite determined to come and work at the Chronicles with him there.’

The sisters stiffen for a moment ; then, recollecting themselves, laugh.

‘I am sure that he will be delighted.’

‘On the contrary, he will not hear of it.’

‘And who is Willy?’ asks Lady Barnes, a question which plainly shows to the visitor that the ex-private secretary has not been considered by his kin an enough creditable relation to figure much in their conversation.

‘He is our brother ; but’—laughing again and more naturally—‘you would never guess it if you saw him.’

‘Your brother? I must have met him—

did I not meet him—at Etheredge?’ turning with a change of key and access of interest to Jane, and insensibly dropping her voice at the name.

Mrs. Etheredge is saved the trouble of answering by the behaviour of a very nice, but not very well-conducted English terrier, who, having stood before her looking significantly up in her face for some moments, now, annoyed at her inability to take a hint, stands up on his hind-legs and begins to scratch at her sombre lap with as much vigour as if he had mistaken it for a rabbit-hole.

‘I am afraid that Jock means you have taken his chair,’ says his mistress regretfully. ‘Would you mind changing to this one? It is quite as comfortable, only he does not fancy it.’

The little diversion stems the current of talk; and before it can run again, a black poodle, with a bangle on one leg and a

superb monogram on his back, asks to be let out. Then they all imagine they hear a butcher-boy, and say so with some emphasis.

‘We shall have no peace till they have had their walk,’ says Lady Barnes, not in the least in a complaining voice, but as if stating an inevitable fact. ‘Do you feel at all inclined to take them for a run on the Common?’—addressing Miss Clarendon. ‘You will find all their muzzles in a basket in the hall. And, dear Mabella, *will* you ring for tea?’

Both girls spring to obey these behests; and divining with the acuteness of much practice in reading the thoughts of useful friends that their hostess wishes for a *tête-à-tête*, both escort the scurrying pack into the open. In a few moments the drawing-room is profoundly peaceful, only five empty baskets and two or three rumpled chair-covers testifying to its recent state of noisy chaos.

‘I killed two birds with one stone,’ says Lady Barnes, wheeling up a low chair, and dropping into her favourite attitude of leaning forward with lace-draped head propped upon long lily hand. ‘The dogs do want a walk cruelly; and I long to have you to myself.’

To the hearer the announcement, though it makes her heart beat with a species of fear, is promise-crammed.

‘They are dear, obliging girls!’—with a glance in the direction of the departed young ladies. ‘Is their brother like them?’

‘Not in the very least.’

‘I suppose he is quite at your feet?’

‘By no means. We are brother and sister’—firmly.

‘How pleasant!’—without enthusiasm. A moment later, thoughtfully: ‘It would be no use any man being at *their* feet, poor things! for they are too buckramed to pick

him up.' She laughs a little, adding: 'Do you suppose that either of them has ever had a history?'

'I have not the most distant idea.

'I can never imagine a woman imprisoned in a horrible tailor gown having one. And yet no one is in the least interesting who has not.'

A sigh heaves her fichu, a sigh which somehow conveys to Mrs. Etheredge that the lack of a romantic past, such as no elegant female should be without, is the life-long crumple in her new friend's rose-leaf. There is a pause, both feeling that so far there has been nothing but a little preliminary fencing, to the unsatisfactoriness of which is added in Jane's mind the fear of a premature return of the two girls sealing the fount of communication for which she thirsts before it is opened. Yet to this fear is added a palpitating dread of setting the water running.

But Lady Barnes has a way of sauntering in where intimates fear to tread, and there is not much beating about the bush in her next sentence.

‘Since I saw you I have been writing to California.’

It is not easy to answer naturally.

‘You correspond with your niece?’

‘Yes ; but it was not to her that I wrote.’

‘No?’

‘It was—to the old acquaintance I met out there. I think I mentioned him to you the other day.’

‘Yes.’

‘Letters are such boons to poor exiles.’

‘I suppose so.’

The arid brevity of these answers would not seem to invite further expansion, but something in the traitor voice that carries them must falsify their dryness. The other changes her attitude a little, releasing Jane’s

face from the hold her eyes have hitherto kept upon it.

‘My niece is too happy to care for my letters. She is not lonely.’

Mrs. Etheredge makes a slight, restless movement, and Lady Barnes, still looking away, and absently arranging the sweep of her long, soft gown-tail more to her mind, goes on dreamily :

‘There is something that gives one a lump in the throat—at least, it does me—in the combination of great physical vigour with profound melancholy.’

This sentiment demands no answer ; at all events, it gets none. Nor does Jane’s interlocutor seem to miss it, for she flows on in a moody low tone :

‘Occasionally—very occasionally one meets with a figure that seems too great for our paltry canvases ; that seems to have stepped straight out of the Middle Ages, a Crusader

that has lost his way in the centuries, with a lady's glove in his helm, and "Faithful unto death" written across his shield.'

Jane is quite aware that no Crusader ever wore any such motto inscribed on the spot indicated, but she is too deeply stirred by the reiterated tidings of her love's fidelity thus obliquely conveyed to be very critical as to the mode of carriage.

'Faithful unto death!' Through the long, narrow, eighteenth-century windows, flung high for the dogs' convenience, her eyes, grown suddenly misty, stray out, and see the exquisite words written over the cedar that sweeps the close-cut brilliancy of the croquet-lawn; over the long-tarrying gaiety of the herbaceous border; over the blood-red drip of the loosened Virginia-creeper leaves. They reconcile her to the overspeedy return of the dogs and their chaperons; more than that, make her welcome it as an excuse for her

own departure, since she is in haste to be alone with the divine phrase, for her heart to suck out the marrow of its sweetness.

Lady Barnes escorts Jane to the door, loath, apparently, to let her go without playing upon her heartstrings one more bar of the music which seems oddly to titillate her own ears and senses at second-hand. To the uninitiated no melody would be apparent in the parting sentences :

‘You like Richmond, so far? enough to make it your home for awhile? You will not flit, and give us the slip, some fine day? Your friends may think of you as fairly settled?’

The other assents, and, succeeding better than she thinks in concealing the choking mixture of joy and guilt with which she realizes to whom the knowledge of her whereabouts is to be transmitted, leaves her new friend rather disappointed at her im-

passiveness. The purpling evening sky and the cyclists racing home through the dusk, who pass her on her way, could tell a different tale. She had never doubted that he would seek her; to this is now added the rapturous certainty that he will know where to find her.

The restlessness engendered by that uplifting news, coupled with the fear of betraying her state of exaltation even to that fire-new and therefore to be distrusted trio, her servants, makes her, since the weather continues admirable, spend most of the next few days in long solitary rambles in the park.

To those who love it, the question is an open one, whether Richmond Park is fairer dressed in the rust-colour and umber of her autumn, or in the flushy thorn-tide of her May. Even in highest tripper-time it is only her fringes that are much sullied by Cockney presences; penetrate nearer her heart, and

you may enjoy in almost solitude her bosky knolls, and the shade of her stag-headed giants—may look down the leafy vista, at whose end the White Lodge shows its modest face ; may stretch away over pleasant turf to Robin Hood Gate, with its outlaw name ; may see the rising ground of Roehampton, and pass amid the gentle-eyed does, too used to human presence to break into their little skipping canter to avoid you ; or, if you prefer it, may on the other side drop your eye down into the Thames Valley, with its river and its dotted dwelling-places sunk in umbrage, and its distant Surrey hills, all scarfed in light golden vapour ; may envy the inhabitants of Pembroke Lodge, and wonder at the brilliant rose-red in which the cherry-trees in Petersham Park have decked themselves, forgetting the bridal raiment of their spring.

Amid these beauties Jane walks in a sort

of ecstasy. She has had a park of her own for eight years ; but it has always been leaden-hearted that she has trodden its glades, dragging the clog of her servitude.

With uplifted head she now walks a free woman ; not alone, for in spirit her love walks beside her. Each fairest spot she makes in fancy the scene of some future incident in the coming drama of bliss. Here, whence one sees the interstices between that further group of forest veterans filled with luminous blue mist, they will stop in their walk, perhaps, and hear and say some priceless low word ; here, beneath the bi-centenary arms of this noble tree, which clings to his summer mantle longer than his brothers, still green, while they are browning, he will tell her of his desperate heart-ache, now for ever healed ; here she will drop her eyes to the vivid grass thrusting itself

through the fallen oak-leaves, and mix her happy tears with the dew-pearls of autumn ; here, leaning against this wooden paling, which protects one of the coverts where the untripper-trodden brake fern boasts in superior vigour over its kindred outside, she will tell him what a little thing it has seemed to her to sacrifice, for his sake, all that to many women appears most important in life.

For two or three days she lets herself go unchecked to these intoxicating day-dreams, oblivious of all else, careless who meets her with glowing face and forgotten weeper flying, as she hastens to imagination's exquisite rendezvous. The only drawback to her rapture for those two or three delirious days is the obtruding thought that it is not *this* year's golds, and rubies, and sapphires which will deck the cloak that is to wrap her splendid bliss in—that this rich

pageant will have to fade into the rude austerity of winter ; that the then naked crowns of these fathers of the forest will have to go through the long processes of burgeon and leaf ; will have begun to look sere again before the fulfilment of her vision can arrive !

The first thing that brings her back to earth, that suddenly flashes upon her consciousness, as by Röntgen rays, with how indecent a haste she has been hurrying to the consummation of her joy, is a letter received from her sister-in-law. The sight of the stiff old characters, set in their inky border, brings her up with a sharp shock. It had never occurred to her that she and Frances would have occasion to correspond. If there were anything of necessary business to be done between them, surely it could be transacted by their lawyers. After that final interview, when she herself had swept away the sug-

gested explanation of her husband's action which would have saved and cleared her, what can there remain to be said between them?

She looks long at the envelope before mustering resolution to open it, and when she does so it is with trembling fingers. The contents are brief—a few dry sentences conveying the information that a deputation from a scientific society, of which Mr. Etheredge had been president, had waited upon the writer, in order to ascertain what form most agreeable to his family the memorial to him which they proposed to erect should take.

‘I think it right to communicate this proposal to you, in case you may have anything to suggest, and am,

‘Faithfully yours,

‘FRANCES ETHEREDGE.

‘P.S.—If there is anything within my power to alleviate the wretchedness of your situation, I should be glad if you would let me know.’

The wretchedness of her situation! There is certainly no intentional irony in the sentence, and yet, read in the light of her past ecstasies, its unconscious sarcasm cuts her like a whip. What has she cared for the squeezey little house, the mean retinue, the general *dégringolade*? What, even, for the poisonous whispers of detraction that, since her husband’s condemnation of her has become public property, have doubtless been busy about her fame? Has she ever been aware of them? *The wretchedness of her situation!* The contrast between the phrase and the reality makes her drop the paper as if it had burnt her, but she presently picks it up again, and rereads it—the metallic formality

of its main purport, and the human relenting of its postscript. Again she lets it fall, with a repetition of that scorched feeling, and, leaning her elbows on the table, knits the fingers of both hands together in penthouse above her brows. Before the eyes thus protected rise in place of the meads and thickets of Eden the walls of that room where she had embittered the last moments of a dying man by her refusal of that prayer, to frame which he had saved his difficult breath; then of that other room, where she had brushed away the last cobweb of belief in herself from before the stony misery of her unwilling supplanter's eyes.

‘If any decent woman had gone through two such ordeals, she would have been prostrate for *years*. While I——’ Her head bends lower, lower, till its crown touches the table.

It is a very decorous figure in weeds that

half an hour later asks for and finds Miss Clarendon at home.

‘This is too nice of you!’ says the young lady cordially, and yet in a tone that somehow brings home to the visitor that the hour is but mid-day, and the drawing-room fire unlit. She feels a sudden constraint.

‘I was going to apologize; but the fact is, I rather wanted to speak to your brother a moment—on business.’

The sister laughs a little.

‘Oh, then, I am not to take it personally. I will go and look for him.’

Left alone, Mrs. Etheredge casts a preoccupied eye round the carefully-made-the-most-of little room; preoccupied, yet which—since she is a woman—recognizes the piece of embroidery admired away from herself a few days ago, and another which she had last seen among the adornments of Lady Barnes’ drawing-room; palms and maiden-

hairs also, to which she assigns a like origin. She is indifferently speculating as to whether they also had been admired away, when Mabella enters, and greets her with apparent pleasure.

‘How nice of you to come! To-day of all days, too, when it is my birthday!’

‘Is it indeed? I wish you many happy returns of it.’

‘Thank you. We are great people for keeping birthdays. Do not you think it is rather a nice custom?’

‘It depends.’

‘We give each other little presents, you know—that sort of thing.’

‘Yes.’

The re-entrance of the elder sister, the captured Willy following her with apparently no great readiness, checks the flow of communication as to the household pieties of the ménage. Something in her friend’s look

recalls to Jane the fact that she has not seen him since their not very satisfactory meeting in the park, when she had concealed from him the goal of her walk, a concealment which her having met his sisters at that goal had rendered worse than useless.

‘It is too bad to dig you out of your earth,’ she says, with a misgiving never before felt as to his willingness to sacrifice to her that time and those pursuits of which she has hitherto so recklessly made hay. ‘But habits are strong things, particularly bad habits.’ She pauses to sigh.

‘Pray do not apologize. Can I do anything for you?’

His tone, though civil, does not reassure her, and she fingers the letter which she has half drawn from her pocket doubtfully.

‘I should have liked to have consulted you upon a small business matter if you had been

at leisure ; but since you are not——' The envelope begins to slide back.

' I am perfectly at leisure.'

' Shall Mabella and I efface ourselves ?' asks Miss Clarendon. ' Or will you take Mrs. Etheredge to your study ?'

The young man's grave look appeals to Jane to decide ; and she, still with that new misgiving, says hesitatingly :

' May I see your den ?'

' You are not going to run away with Mrs. Etheredge ?' cries Mabella in playful remonstrance, that yet has a kernel of vexation in it, ' just as I was going to show her my presents ? I have been telling her that it is my birthday.'

' You are quite determined that we shall none of us forget that fact,' retorts he tartly, throwing—to the visitor—an inexplicably snubbing look over his shoulder at his junior.

Marvelling inwardly, and not quite com-

fortably, at the unexplored regions just revealed to her in a map of which she had imagined herself mistress of every cove and headland, she follows her guide to his realm among the chimney-pots.

CHAPTER VII.

‘ You are not very handsomely lodged ! ’ says Jane, looking round with some indignation at the shabby attic, of whose original function evidences still remain in the dress-baskets piled against the wall, and over whose table, chairs, and floor the young man’s too copious library has swept in flood. ‘ Could not your sisters have arranged to give you a better room ? ’

‘ They naturally like to keep a spare one for a friend,’ replies he indifferently, though she is not sure that he does not very slightly flush ; ‘ and they know how little I care.’

The intruder sighs rather ruefully.

‘You are one of those unfortunates who were only invented in order to be put upon.’

He is busy clearing one of his few chairs of a great quarto, obviously open for reference, and offers it to her without answering. His silence frets her, and it is with some sharpness, though of a trepidating sort, that she asks :

‘Am I indebted to Mrs. Grundy for this new departure ? or is there really a rift within the lute ?’

He stops suddenly before her, embracing an armful of dusty volumes which he is shifting for her convenience, with an apparent impulse towards unamiable speech stirring his lips. But he controls it, relieving his feelings by pitching his books into the corner, and only says quietly :

‘Shall we get to business ?’

For all answer she puts her sister-in-law’s letter into his hand. He takes it formally,

but her eyes note the quickened interest with which he recognizes the handwriting, and the rapid eagerness with which he masters its drift.

‘She means kindly, poor soul!’ says Mrs. Etheredge, with that pitying inflection which always marks her mention of her successor.

It might sound like affectation, though the idea does not occur to her, so deeply rooted in her mind is the persuasion that compassion is the only emotion which this loveless old Cræsus can inspire.

‘Yes, evidently—undoubtedly,’ he answers, forgetting to be dry, and with pleased animation in look and tone. ‘She obviously wishes to keep up friendly relations with you.’

‘Do you think so?’ rejoins Jane slowly and without elation, her eyes perusing the threadbare Kidder which is ‘good enough for Willy’s den.’

She has every wish to be at peace and in

Christian charity with her 'in-law'—but to reknit the old irksome tie! Is not Frances an integral part of that past which she would fain slough off as a snake its last year's skin? She knows better, however, than to impart this train of reflection to her adviser, who, however, is possibly not very far from guessing it. Possibly it is in protest against the dumb rebellion of her thought that he leans across the knee-hole table that divides them a face of deep anxiety in its thin acuteness, and says :

'If she stands by you, it will make an enormous difference in your position.'

'I suppose so'—reluctantly; then, with much more life, 'Poor old woman! I thought I had seen and heard the last of her.'

The wish is so obviously father to the thought that Clarendon frowns vexedly, but, since Mrs. Etheredge's eyes are still on the carpet, she does not perceive it.

‘Then you do not mean to answer it?’

‘*Of course* I shall answer it.’

He runs his eye again over the letter, which he still holds in his hand, and his next sentence comes slowly :

‘You have probably not as yet given much thought to the subject of it?’

Her fresh face kindles into a flame lit by the guilty consciousness of how different a theme from that of erecting a monument to her late husband is the one that has monopolized her thoughts.

‘No—o, not much ;’ adding with evident difficulty, ‘but you need not think that I am not aware that there ought to be memorials of him. He did a great deal for science and literature.’

‘Yes, a great deal!’

The tribute wrung from her justice seems to herself dry as dust, and his response appears to have caught its aridity. There is

a pause, broken—when it is broken—by Jane.

‘It never occurred to me that I should be consulted.’

‘No?’

‘It seems a sort of mockery, does not it?’

This is a question to which only an affirmative answer can truly be given, and Clarendon wisely makes none. On the contrary, he starts a query of his own.

‘Do you wish to consult me as to the terms in which you will answer?’

‘Do I not always consult you?’

To this also he makes no answer, and there is something almost wistful in her next appeal.

‘Do not ask me to give up my rooted habit of piling all my burdens upon you.’

He gets up suddenly and begins to cram papers into a pigeon-hole, saying, while thus occupied :

‘It is a habit that you will soon lay aside.’

Something in the significance of his tone startles her, and she asks herself, in guilty panic, whether, through a window in her breast, he can have spied the red riot of revolt against decorum and convention that has been reigning there. It is a moment or two before she can ask pretty quietly :

‘Is that shaft shot because I did not take your advice as to returning Lady Barnes’ visit?’

He allows this also to go unanswered.

‘I suppose that your sisters told you of having met me there?’

‘They naturally saw no reason for concealing the fact.’

‘Nor was there any!’—drawing herself up.
‘There is, at all events, this alleviation to “the wretchedness of my situation,” that I am perfect mistress of my own actions.’

‘Is there anyone who would have the imbecility to deny it?’

The complexions of both friends are warming, but the man, both from a more self-controlled nature and the consciousness of advantage in the argument, has himself best in hand. Logic failing her, Mrs. Etheredge takes refuge in rhetoric.

‘Are you going to choose this peculiarly favourable moment for quarrelling with me?’

‘*Am* I quarrelling with you?’

‘You are doing your level best.’

A melancholy sardonic smile touches the corners of his mouth.

‘My “bests” in any direction have never been very good, and this is no exception.’

At his tone her anger dies, and she leans her elbows—black-gloved hands framing her fair face—on the worn leather of the writing-table in agreeable neighbourhood to his, which, however, he immediately withdraws.

‘Let us talk reasonably. I did not tell you that I was on my way to call upon Lady Barnes, because I knew that you would throw cold water upon it.’

‘Yes?’

‘I warn you that I shall very likely repeat my visit.’

‘I have no doubt of it.’

‘Being such as I am—and, after all, I did not make myself—it is impossible for me, under my circumstances, as I told you before, to sit at home gnawing out my heart in solitary mock-sorrow—yes, I *will* speak the truth to you!’ as he gives a slight start; ‘if I do not have companionship of some kind, I can’t answer for myself. Lady Barnes holds out a friendly hand to me, and I take it.’

He bows his head as if in acquiescence, but the detected irony of the gesture sets her off again at score.

‘As usual, I applied to you for help ; I asked you to share your work with me ; yet, with this plethora ’—dramatically indicating the wilderness of his papers—‘you refused me a crumb!’

‘That is not quite an accurate statement of fact ; but I suppose that accuracy has always been a noun of masculine gender.’

His tone is coldly respectful, but his words kindle in her a contrasting fire.

‘You put me off with a preposterous excuse that Mrs. Grun——’

He breaks in upon her reminder abruptly, as if unable to bear the repetition of her ridicule of the idea that their names could ever be coupled by any sane person.

‘Yes, yes ; I remember!’

There is a heated pause, he struggling, though she does not suspect it, to retain his composure, shaken to its foundations by that flier, she endeavouring to recover hers.



When she next speaks her voice is no longer scornful.

‘I used to think that you liked my help, but’—with a sigh—‘one’s illusions flee like shadows.’

She withdraws her elbows slowly from the table, and begins to pull down again her lifted veil, as if to depart.

‘It was invaluable to me in—in the dear old days.’

Her hands pause in their employment, and her lips voicelessly reframe his words: ‘*The dear old days!*’ Is it possible that he can regret them?

* * * * *

Mrs. Etheredge does not depart immediately, after all. In the course of five minutes her veil has again been raised, and her elbows replaced; and when, after the lapse of three-quarters of an hour, she does really leave the room, it is with the rough draft of

an answer to her sister-in-law's letter in her pocket, and a thick octavo, of which she has insisted on making a digest, under her arm. She looks in to say good-bye when passing the drawing-room, just in time to catch Mabella's communication to an old lady who, like herself, is paying an early call: 'We always make a little fête of our birth-days: it is mine to-day;' and the answer: 'Indeed, my dear! I wish I had known it before, as I should have liked to bring you some little trifle. But perhaps it is not too late now?'

The rejoinder throws sudden light upon what her own was intended to have been, and also explains the apparently causeless waspishness of Mabella's brother.

* * * *

Jane writes a very nice letter to her sister-in-law, improving considerably upon the outline sketched by Clarendon, throwing

over its phrases the fragrance of a sympathetic melancholy. One often accuses mourners of insincerity, because their letters give such a much stronger impression of sadness than is conveyed by their personal presence, when, in fact, the written translation of their spirit is by far the truer one.

There is no conscious hypocrisy in Jane's sorrowful tone. With the pen in her hand, the dismal scenes through which she has passed rise up before her, obscuring the glories of her later visions ; and face to face with that embodiment of endless grief presented by Miss Etheredge, her own future grows black with clouds. She, like Frances, has her all in one boat. What security has she that a similar shipwreck may not overtake her craft to that which has foundered the other's ? Her sympathy, though coloured by selfishness, has yet a

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good solid substratum of real pity ; and it rings none the less genuine for the alloy. There are sincere tears in her eyes as she seals her note, and it is with a jarred feeling that she hears the name of ' Lady Barnes ' pronounced by her servant, and sees its owner float pensively in with a tiny black Spitz under her arm.

' I am calling again very soon,' she says, ' but I hope we are not on quite the usual dreary footing.'

The implication of something elect and apart in their relations at first makes keener in Jane the sense of out-of-tuneness, which, however, cannot check the upspringing guilty thought, ' Has she come with tidings ?'

' I thought I would look in for a moment to see how you were getting on.

The guilty hope dies, and conscience revives, lending a frost to the tone in which Mrs. Etheredge asks her visitor whether

she had rather sit near or far from the fire.

‘Near, I think ; I am a chilly creature !’—
Then, with a solicitous look, which, as Jane feels, takes in her still tear-sparkling eyes :
‘No bad news, I hope?’

The other shakes her head, with a choked feeling of how indecently different from other widows of her standing she must be, for two salt drops to excite such surprise in an acquaintance. The visitor leans back, slowly loosening an emu-feather boa from about her long throat, and says, in a tone of melancholy epicurean enjoyment :

‘*How* understandingly I can feel for you !
J’ai passé par là. And just at the time when one’s spirits are weakest and most need support, society condemns one to solitary confinement.’

It is a relief to the object of so much sympathy that the difficult answer is

taken out of her mouth by the little Spitz, who, springing light as foam from her mistress's lap, flies to the window, testifying in a series of barks like the sharpest pin-pricks against some object of offence outside.

'She sees something that annoys her in the road,' says Lady Barnes with regretful resignation. 'It is no use calling her; we had better wait till she has finished.'

Jane is glad of the interval. The sentiment expressed by her guest is exactly her own, yet something in her present mood makes her unwilling overtly to endorse it. Even by the time that little Elsa has ceased her battery upon their ears, and has cantered complacently back with a smirk of duty accomplished to her mistress's knees, she has no assent ready. Lady Barnes, unaffected by her silence, takes up the theme in a key of delicate condolence.

‘You have your friend Mr. Clarendon. That is something.’

‘Yes; I do not know what I should do without him.’

It would seem to Jane at once ridiculous and disloyal to disguise the extent of her friendship for and obligation to the young man. Nor does the shade of surprise which she cannot help seeing steal over her companion’s features make her do anything but reassert her strongly-worded opinion.

‘I really do not know what I should do without him.’

Lady Barnes pushes back her chair a little, as if the fire had caught the ivory of her faded face, or as if the declaration compelled her to look at the situation from a new angle.

‘It is strange,’ she says dreamily, ‘that I cannot in the least recall his existence that time at Etheredge. I suppose in that

delightful little party he was "snowed over," as the Americans say, by more remarkable personalities.'

She pauses, and, warned by something in her listener's eye that she is treading on unsafe ground, slides away from it.

'It is an interesting face. He came into the room for a moment while I was calling on his sisters just now. It was very apparent'—laughing softly—'that he did not know I was there. Is he the least bit *sauvage*? But it *is* an interesting face. Those irregular ones have their charm.'

'I do not think I have ever noticed what he looked like,' returns Mrs. Etheredge dryly.

The assertion seems for some reason to give Lady Barnes relief.

'Oh yes, I quite understand. He is *there*, and you are used to him, and that is the end of the matter. His companionship is just a

help to make the days pass, to bridge the chasm of these terrible first months.'

She heaves a gentle, retrospective sigh, stroking her emu feathers meditatively with admirable pale gloves. Her eyes are fixed with thoughtful enjoyment upon Jane's face.

'You do not mind my saying so, but it is so pleasant to see you without your bonnet. The cap has, at all events, mercifully almost disappeared. *Le bonnet de la liberté*, a Frenchwoman called it, but I never could look on it in that light.'

As her hostess does not interrupt her, she flows on musingly, as if more to herself than her companion :

'It is strange that in the march of civilization such an anomaly should be tolerated, as that when a poor woman has lost, or is supposed to have lost, all that she held dearest in life, she should have the immense

aggravation of a hideous livery of woe forced upon her.'

Her languid voice takes on an emphasis which shows how little she has forgotten her own sufferings in the case alluded to. As she finishes, she draws herself slowly up to her feet.

'I really do not know why I came to-day, except that some magnet seemed to draw me as I passed your door. I feel—I hope you do the same—that we have a great deal in common. I have never'—sighing—'had any very vivid personal interest in my own life, so I seem to live *intensely* in my friends.'

By this time one of the pale gloves is closely clasping Mrs. Etheredge's right hand, and it is only by the aid of a tiny black god out of the car that she is rescued from the sentimental *impasse*. That god is the good little Elsa, who, apparently disapproving of female enthusiasms, springs from under her

mistress's arm, with the intention of making her teeth—pin-like as the voice which accompanies them—meet in the prisoned fingers of the lady on whom she is calling. The plan, though admirably sketched, is frustrated by her owner, but it puts an end at once to the visit and the dilemma.

* * * * *

Jane's answer to her sister-in-law's letter, unimpeachably nice and sincerely sad as is its tone, calls forth no rejoinder, her relief at which fact she does not think it necessary to impart to Clarendon, in the face of his confessed disappointment at the door being shut again so immediately upon its partial reopening. Her own spirits no longer jar upon him with the feverish buoyancy of their first rebound. She has lost her grip upon that surety of future bliss which had given her wings on hearing of her beloved as alive and faithful. It is not that any lightest cloud

of doubt as to his fidelity ever crosses her mind, but that the changes and chances of mortal life sit heavy upon her heart. He may die—why not?—before the fruition of her glorious vision ; her former confidence in whose realization strikes her now as nothing less than lunatic. His eye may never fall upon the announcement of her freedom ; his family may purposely conceal it from him. Lady Barnes' letter may never overtake him in his roving life—roving from restless misery.

She never now indulges herself in those solitary rambles in the park where the glories of red fern and blue woodland had connived at and heightened her spirit-drunkenness ; and, indeed, as autumn droops and dwindles into winter such rambles would lose their intoxication. About the stripped oaks a clinging white fog winds itself. It fills the valley to the brim, pressing up day after day

against the windows of the little house where a young woman who has seen better, or at least larger, days sits, sometimes trying vainly at mid-day to make out the lamp-post on the other side of the road. Now that she has to be so much more confined to them, the crampedness of her rooms irks her, and she is ashamed to hear a sort of echo in her own mind of the heart-felt condolence offered to her repeatedly by one or other of the Misses Clarendon :

‘What a dreadful change it must be for you! I cannot think how you bear it so well.’

‘It is always a good thing to simplify life. I eat my cutlet much more comfortably than I did when half a dozen pair of solemn men’s eyes were watching me.’

She holds up her head and speaks lightly, all the more so that Clarendon himself is among her listeners. And, indeed, the regret

for her lost luxuries is a faint and fleeting one, soon translated into enthusiasm at having a few more sacrifices to lay upon the altar of the god of her idolatry. After all, too, each lightless winter day that swaddles up her river view in its drenching, bath-sheet fog, as it passes into the night, whence it is scarcely distinguishable, is hasting on to those January joy-bells which are to clang in the unspeakable joys of 'next year.'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE dusky months roll by, and people make their usual lamentations over the early withdrawal of light, their invariable grumble that December 21 is really not the shortest day. Aspirations on the part of parents, that Christmas were over, are followed in accustomed sequence by wailings on the part of children that it *is*. In fact, the general life of humanity runs in its old ruts, though to each several soul the season comes clad in some new regret, rejoicing, dread, or hope. An infinite sameness in the whole, coupled with an infinite variety of parts, characterizes, as ever, the history of the race.

Mrs. Etheredge has eaten her Christmas dinner with the Clarendons, and they have been very kind and hospitable, and very anxious to hinder her from dwelling too miserably upon the memory of former splendour and festivities connected with the season.

As each girl has, with pretty sisterly naïveté, let her into the secret of the precise article of commerce of which the other is most in need, but which is just beyond the means of the speaker to procure for her, Jane is able to feel, though the vulgarity of the thought shocks her, that she has paid handsomely for her entertainment. But it is difficult to be much in the society of Flora and Mabella Clarendon without growing to take a debit and credit view of social life. The determination to be 'smart' upon an income on which most people's ambition would confine itself to being decent has had

the natural result of making them regard every new acquaintance in the light of a milch cow. Practice has given them an extraordinary quickness and nicety in gauging on a first introduction the amount of presents, theatre tickets, opera boxes, etc., for which each addition to their circle is likely to be good.

As their intimacy with herself has increased, Jane has been more and more initiated into the minutiae of their manœuvres, about which, indeed, there is no great secret ; has come to understand that there is a roughly-marked division of labour between them, Mabella, as the prettier and more coquettish, laying siege to young men with neckties, shooting-stockings, and driving-gloves of her own manufacture, while Flora undertakes the flattering old women, pampering spoilt children, and nursing sick dogs. There is also a general field comprising frag-

ments of London seasons, months at Scotch moors, and trips to the Continent, on which they labour harmoniously in concert. But they have the qualities of their defects, and the very pliancy and self-control they have acquired in long bending to profitable irritabilities, and swallowing lucrative snubs, has given them a smoothness of temper which renders intercourse with them easy and pleasant to one not bound by blood to blush for their little obliquities.

By the end of the winter Mrs. Etheredge has a toleration for them tinged with liking, and even, to her own surprised amusement, a sort of topsy-turvy respect for their dauntless determination to keep their heads above water. They might relax their efforts a little now, since—Jane divines it without being told—so large a portion of their brother's annuity goes to swell the household funds; but habit is stronger than necessity, and

they pinch and push and hint as merrily as ever. What are the sufferings of that brother under their little ingenuities—of which they, however, kindly conceal the major part from his withering eyes—his friend knows pretty well by that same winter's end, though it is a wound whose shrinking soreness prevents her laying the unguent of any sympathy upon it. But his mastery over himself being not as complete as that possessed by the ladies of his family, twisted hands, bitten lips, and lightening eyes betray the writhing agony of his pride, when by some unlucky accident evidence of the two girls' little industries comes within his wrathful ken.

Yet, despite these drawbacks, Jane knows that to him it has been a happy winter. And to herself? Well, it has passed more quickly than she could have believed possible. It never occurs to Mrs. Etheredge to ask her-

self how much of its ease and swiftness is due to his companionship, which every day renders more a matter of course. She scarcely thanks him—does the left hand thank the right for its superior efficiency?—for the numberless tiresome little services which she asks with the unthinkingness of a child, or which he gives unasked. The large holes in his time made by interviews with plumbers about her waste-pipes, by upbraidings of house-agents for unexpected frailties in her water-supply, etc., leave her as conscienceless as ever.

But to set against them, of what valid assistance has she been to him in his work? How many nights has she sat up long after her three maids were abed struggling to get finished her digest of that rare and almost contemporary book of Annals which throws so many sidelights upon the period of his labours, in time to present it to him as a

Christmas gift? How many murky trips on the District Railway has she taken to the British Museum to look up archaic words and hunt out obscure allusions for him?

She may look back with an approving conscience upon the past months—months of honest work and uncomplaining endurance of strange privations, uncomplaining even when her pipes froze, and left her for three weeks at the mercy of a precarious standpipe and an uncertain bath. And if she has occasionally slipped from her high level, and sought to strange gods in the shape of Lady Barnes, does not every day that passes make this descent less and less of a frailty? Is not she now a widow of seven months' standing? and even in her lapses has not she maintained a high level of self-restraint? damming the stream of her friend's too copious sympathy, and even stemming the current of

her tidings, contenting herself with the knowledge that the news of her deliverance has in very truth reached the ear for which it is destined, but refusing to listen to any hints, however veiled, as to the rapture it has caused.

And now March has come hurtling in with hard, loud bragging of east wind, and gentler clamour of married birds, with young green corn splitting the pierced clod, and stout-budded promise of daffadillies.

‘You look like an incarnation of spring,’ says Lady Barnes in a voice of slow pleasure, as she rises from the writing-table, where she is sealing a letter, to greet a visitor, whom the song of the mated thrushes, the rising sap in the trees, the coursing of her own young blood, has driven willy-nilly across the Common to drink at her usual fount of intoxication.

Jane raises her eyebrows playfully.

‘Of *spring*? I do not know what right I have to do that, as I was twenty-six last week.’

‘Yes; early summer would be better,’ replies the other, correcting herself, and still regarding her friend with æsthetic enjoyment. ‘June! You should have come in with the roses.’

‘I came in with the east wind instead,’ rejoins Mrs. Etheredge, rather bored by her companion’s admiration, which she yet knows to be an unavoidable feature of the entertainment.

‘Your birthday last week! and you never told me of it!’

Mrs. Etheredge laughs dryly, a merriment in which, after a moment, Lady Barnes delicately joins.

‘You are thinking that those dear girls put one a little out of conceit with anniversaries. But, then, they have such an

abnormal number of birthdays. They seem to have been born once a fortnight.'

Lady Barnes' laughter is never long, and it soon dies again into sensibility.

'Twenty-six! At twenty-six I was still a girl, with a girl's dreams and illusions; while you——' She makes a dramatic pause; then, in a lower and more confidential key: 'But even though one is not a girl, one may have dreams, may not one?'

Jane's answer is to veer round to the French window, whence the poodle may be seen furiously digging a large hole in the border, and making the earth fly up in his own moustaches, under the energy of his braceleted paw. Near him the crocuses are opening their dewy cups almost into flat patens, under the warmth of the spring sun, shooting their fire through the brilliant grass. Lady Barnes has flowed back to the writing-table—her gait is always river-like in its

smoothness—and Jane feels, rather than sees, her hold up the red-sealed letter, which had caught her own eye on entrance.

‘I always seal my letters when they contain anything which I do not wish to share with the Post-Office, do not you?’

‘I am afraid I do not.’

The elder lady looks with pensive relish at the missive in her hand.

‘What a comfort it is when one can exchange a twopenny-halfpenny stamp for a penny one! There is something paralyzing in a foreign stamp, is not there?’

The younger woman’s heart suddenly quickens its healthy beat, but that and drawn-in breath are her only answer. Her eyes take in the fact of a modest circle of tender lilac-and-white crocuses ringing a weeping ash ; but they do not carry it to her brain. Lady Barnes lays down the letter again.

‘My Californian correspondent has come within the reach of a penny.’

‘You mean—that he is in England?’

‘Yes; in London.’

After that, the visitor can have but one thought—how to get away. She never afterwards knows what promises she has made, or to what propositions assented, in order to escape from the too clinging tenacity of her female admirer, and obtain the enormous relief of being alone with this tremendous news. In England—nay, in London! Not till she has reached the brown oaks of the park, which, though barer than in January, have yet an indefinable air of beginning to stir in their sleep, dares she face what the fact means. So absolutely oversetting is it that if she can help it no one must see her face until she has tamed it down to some nearer likeness of average humanity to whose features no love-torch has set fire.

Till then she hies to the least-frequented stretch of the park, which the harshness of the knifey breeze has swept pretty clear of other haunters for her.

Then at last she ventures to look her tumultuous bliss in the very eyes. In London! Any day she may meet him in Piccadilly; may see his nobly-carried head high lifted above the dwarfed crowd. And if she does, what will happen? Will her heart fly bodily out of her breast to him before all the omnibuses and pedestrians? or will she just put out her hand, and say, 'It is a long time since we have met'? Or will *he* say it? or will neither of them say anything, but just stand, shaking and stammering, in mid-thoroughfare?

Her imagination breaks down under the effort to picture the glorious madness of that reunion. She covers her bodily eyes, in the effort to concentrate her attention upon its

details, but before that of her mind there appears only a blur of radiance. For hours she walks, in what direction she neither knows nor cares, vaguely reminded now and then by the north-easter's whip-lash to quicken her pace, her feet rustling through dead summer treasures of strewn leafage, and her head knocking against heaven.

When at length the lowering of the hard spring light admonishes her to turn homewards, she does so lingeringly, thinking with elation that there is no one to question her as to what has delayed her. She would have loitered still more had she known what awaited her. As she lets herself in with her latch-key, she sees a solitary letter lying on the hall slab. Her correspondence since her fall is neither large nor interesting, and with supreme indifference she gives a momentary glance at the address. It is in a handwriting which causes her to

feel a sudden chill, and for two or three moments she fingers the envelope under the just-lit gas, before she can raise enough resolution to open it.

‘ ETHEREDGE, LAMINSTER,

‘ *March 3.*

‘ DEAR JANE,

‘ I have just received from the artist to whom has been entrusted the execution of the recumbent monument to be erected in the church here, to the memory of my late brother and your late husband, an intimation that the work is now completed, and inviting me to inspect it. I think it right that you should also be given the opportunity of doing so, the more so as your letter of October 20 conveyed the expression of a very proper feeling on the subject. I would suggest that we should go together, and, if perfectly convenient to you, would claim your hospitality for a couple of nights.

‘ Hoping that your spirits are beginning to recover their tone, and that you are becoming partially inured to the privations of your lot,

‘ I remain,

‘ Yours truly,

‘ FRANCES ETHEREDGE.

‘ P.S.—I shall be obliged by an *early* answer.’

The revulsion is too great, and for several minutes Jane stands frozen in the little hall, her cold fingers holding numbly the dreary instrument of her sudden recall from the empyrean. She feels as though bony hands were icily pulling her down from the airs and radiances of heaven into the clammy closeness of the vault at Etheredge. A ring at the door-bell rouses her. To the parlour-maid who rises from the basement to answer it she can just articulate ‘Not at home!’

and steps aside into the back dining-room (which has been arranged as a study), so as not to be seen by the caller. The heard voice of that caller brings her forth from her retirement, and a minute later he and she are facing each other in her den, which has caught a look of his through the litter of papers and books of reference which encumber writing-table, chairs and floor. That resemblance always gives him a senseless lightness of heart, but now he forgets both to be glad and to chide himself for that gladness.

‘What is it?’

For answer she silently puts into his hand, as she had done in the case of the former one, her sister-in-law’s letter. While he is reading it she sits down, and leaning her elbows on the foolscap sheet of paper, half covered with her morning’s work, clutches her face with both hands, and stares sullenly

out at the young horse-chestnut - tree in the meagre garden, which, outgrowing its cramped surroundings, is pushing its quickening leaf-buds almost against the pane. As Clarendon returns her the letter without observation, Jane says doggedly :

‘ She must come, I suppose ?’

‘ Can there be any doubt as to that ?’

The only answer he gets is a sigh, so much too tremendous for the cause which produced it that there is surprise, as well as disapprobation, in his—

‘ It will be only for two nights.’

She wheels round upon him, flashing-eyed.

‘ What has the length of time got to say to it ? Is it possible that you do not see the monstrous anomaly of *my* building the sepulchre of the righteous ? of *my* helping to compose the epitaph of a man the stigma of whose vengeance upon me I am to carry through life ?’

Her voice vibrates in the darkening room, while from the twilit brown pear-tree outside one of the winged minstrels of spring is speaking through the dusk, 'Be quick, be quick! Wait a bit, wait a bit!'

The difference in tone between the human and feathered votaries of love might strike a disengaged ear, but there is none such present.

A restless movement on Mrs. Etheredge's part presently reveals her uneasiness under the eyes keenly scrutinizing her in the gloaming, eyes the result of whose observation presently gathers itself into low and deliberate speech.

'You have had something else beside this to upset you.'

Instantly, in the slang of the time, the young woman gives herself away.

'You have no earthly right to say so.

Their intimacy must have stridden far and

fast during the winter months, for her lighting fails even to scar his bark.

‘I merely threw it out as a suggestion.’

‘There are suggestions that not even the closest friendship can justify.’

He lifts his eyebrows.

‘And does this one come under that head?’

But she is angrily silent.

* * * * *

Anger or no anger, it has been a foregone conclusion throughout the interview, as both parties to it are fully aware, that Miss Etheredge’s offer of herself shall be accepted, and the date of her advent has now arrived. It has been postponed several times, possibly because the proposer of it finds her own courage shrink from the ordeal, so that April has had time to smile and pout herself in before the dreaded day dawns.

That most illogical and unequal of months

has, indeed, half run her pettish race by the time that a stiff note fixing train and hour robs Jane of her last coward hope of escape. She spends the whole of the morning out of doors, incapable of sitting still, and trying to turn the encompassing blue air into a composing draught.

But Spring, whatever else she may be, is not soothing. In her Pandora box of gifts she brings no lulling poppies.

The season is a forward one. The elms that shade the terrace walk are covered with little leaves, all brilliantly new, and unspoil't by canker or weather. It is like a world in which everybody is young, all radiant youths and maidens. The oaks still keep their secret, though it is evidently on the very point of escaping, but beneath the hornbeams drifts of fallen tassels encumber her feet. The tap of the woodpecker falls on an absent ear, and she forgets to turn her

money at the voice of the first cuckoo ; but the whole jocund April-tide, whether expressing itself in sound, colour, or perfume, goes to swell the volume of her complicated emotion.

In the vain effort to get herself in hand she far outstays her usual luncheon-hour. When at length she remembers it, she finds she cannot eat. Miss Etheredge is to arrive at six o'clock in the evening. The hours race that bring the intensely shrunk-from meeting nearer, yet Mrs. Etheredge would fain use whip and spur to the flying minutes in order to get that meeting over. Days ago she had made every arrangement possible to her for the reception of her visitor ; had racked her brain to recall all her fads and little rigid habits, had even put Clarendon's memory under contribution to aid her.

There is nothing left to do, except a last trip to the small chintzy bedroom, to which, as

she feels with vexation, she has been able to give so little likeness to the large severity of Frances' own grim bower. It is at least innocent of flowers, since Miss Etheredge regards them as poisonous in a bedroom, nor has, indeed, much opinion of their gay frivolity anywhere indoors.

But the bed! Surely it is all wrong. It is too wide, too sybaritic. It ought not to have pillows—flinging them on the sofa at the bed-foot—nor a duvet—repeating the manœuvre. The windows should be shut and bolted before the damp begins to rise—rattling down the sashes; and the cheval glass must be wheeled bodily out of the room—ringing for the housemaid.

CHAPTER IX.

THERE is absolutely nothing more to be done. Jane has strictly surveyed her own dress in the glass to be sure that no relaxation has crept in unawares upon the rigidity of her weeds. She has assumed a black-bordered pocket-handkerchief, though the action gives her a greater sense of fraud than almost any other of her whole plain-sailing life, and has resumed her long-disused widow's cap.

It is true that she has taken the latter off again, partly because its streamers fret her to death, partly because the look of uncontrollable surprise in her parlourmaid's eyes

at its reappearance makes her feel shy. But it is perched, transfixed with two bonnet-pins, on the top of the pole of a little Chippendale fire-screen, ready to be snatched off and assumed as soon as the wheels of her sister-in-law's cab are heard to pause at her hall door.

After many agitated vacillations and to-and-froings of mind and body, she has decided to receive her visitor in the back drawing-room. The front one is a sun-trap looking south-west, but in the little back one the light is always more or less discreet. To go down to meet her at the hall door, though desirable from the point of view of the deference it would evidence, must be to expose the painful awkwardness of their meeting to the curious eyes of the servants; while to welcome her in the front drawing-room, full of penetrating brightness, despite its carefully drawn-down outside blinds,

would be to reveal all too soon in how far better case than is expected of her as to physical conditions she herself is.

Agitation has perversely flushed instead of paling her, and where decorum would prescribe eucharis lilies, she has nothing to offer but the petals of a June rose.

The back drawing-room, then, it is to be. And there towards half-past five she establishes herself. It is not a room that she usually occupies, and she feels strange in it. Her employments, work-basket, Mudie books, etc., are all in the other, and it is not worth while to transplant them, since the migration is only temporary, until Miss Etheredge shall have become acclimatized to her own unseemly bloom.

She seats herself with her back to the light, and waits, her eyes upon the clock. It wants five minutes to the hour at which, postulating punctual trains and a good horse,

the traveller is timed to arrive, when a ring at the door-bell makes Mrs. Etheredge grip the arms of her chair and sit straight up listening. The plunge is to come five minutes before she had reckoned on it. All the better.

No sound of horses or wheels salutes her ears ; but here at the back of the house noises are deadened, and an indiarubber-tired hansom announces itself but softly. The servant has evidently been on the watch, for the hall door is heard to open at once ; nor is there, apparently, any pause for paying the cab, since footsteps are immediately audible on the stairs. But what a heavy foot Frances has ! She always wears strong boots, it is true ; but what an extraordinarily heavy foot for so small and slight a woman ! One would say indubitably that it was a man's.

In order further to subdue the light, Jane has closed the seldom-shut folding-doors

between the front and back rooms, and she now hears her servant open the door of the front-room, look in, utter an exclamation of surprise, and say :

‘Mrs. Etheredge must be upstairs. I will go and look for her.’

The person addressed answers but one word, ‘Thanks.’

But one word! and it is nearly six years since she heard the voice that seems to utter it. Is it some jugglery that at such a moment brings it to her ears?

With a stagger she reaches the folding-doors, tears one open, and stands in the aperture facing—whom? Someone—can it be herself?—voices a harsh sound that might be ‘Jack!’ and the next moment she is snatched to the breast against which, only once before in fact, though millions of times in heated fancy — she has been pressed. For a moment Creation is abolished.

nothing in Time or Space but him and her. He who once, in the white light of the Circular Garden, crowded all the agony of his desire and farewell into one mad storm of forbidden kisses, is now raining kisses as mad, but with the glad contrary of farewell in them, upon eyes, and lips, and hair. For an instant or two she is as mad as he, lost in reckless rapture ; then :

‘ Let me go ; she is coming back.’

That her first sentence to him should be a request to be ‘ let go ’ has never formed part of any of her visions of their reunion, but the parlourmaid’s step, heard inexorably tripping down the last flight of stairs from above, dispels for a second her mistress’s heavenly lunacy. It is only just in time that her lover releases Jane, who, turning away her disordered face and ruffled head—is that also in time ?—hears the servant announce that Mrs. Etheredge is not upstairs, and the voice—

which for six long years has rung, and mourned, and pleaded in a heart that has held no other sound worth hearing — brusquely answer that he is aware of that fact.

The door closes reluctantly, and they are alone again. The man's one impulse is to resume the interrupted embrace, but the woman, though her hunger for it is certainly not less than his, retreating waves him off.

'No, no! It is impossible. He has been dead only eight months.'

'I do not care if he has been dead only eight minutes! I only know that he *is* dead!'

The words are brutal, and she knows that they are; but beneath the light crust of shock that they give her lies the boiling ocean of joy that what he says is true.

At that they stand staring a while, drinking in each other after their long, long thirst, chiding memory for having served them so miserably in the face of their gorgeous

reality. The man, as is right, first recovers the power of speech.

‘You are changed!’

‘For the worse?’

His eyes answer her to that, and she varies her question :

‘For the better?’

‘I did not think it possible ; but yes, yes, *yes !*’

By the end of the sentence she is again in his arms, and each affirmation burns into her neck, for her face is hidden on his breast, in a stinging kiss. She lifts her head enough to be able to see his features.

‘You are changed too,’ she falters, with a delicious new timidity, taking in the added manliness of what had been manly before, the rich colouring given by tropic suns and ocean winds, and the intenser meaning lent by love and suffering to the falcon eyes.

He returns her question upon her :

‘For the worse?’

But in answer her face drops again to its hiding-place.

Thus, locked in this divine oblivion, they stand clutching one another, as if to wring from the past and concentrate in one all the foregone embraces of six harvestless years. But suddenly, before he has divined her intention, Jane has snatched herself away, and stands aloof from him, beyond the limit of even his reach of arm.

‘This is monstrous! This cannot be! I tell you it is too soon—too soon!’ she ejaculates between quick panting breaths; ‘you ought not to have come.’

‘Clarendon comes!’

‘*Clarendon!*’

It had need to be a robust and clinging jealousy that could stand against that intonation.

‘I did not mean to come—not till you

gave me leave ; but—but it was too strong for me!—being so near !’

He, too, is panting.

‘ *So near !* did you come from London ?’

‘ No ; from Ham. I am staying with Lady Barnes.’

‘ With Lady Barnes !’

An arrow of a thought whizzes through Mrs. Etheredge’s surging head—the thought of what an ill, yet what a divinely good, turn her sentimental friend has done her.

‘ You know, then—she has told you—you have heard—about the will ?’

‘ Yes, I have heard. Oh, my own ! beggared for my sake !’

It is not the fault of Mr. Miles that a very serious relapse does not follow this affecting reflection, but by this time Jane is awake, pulled back by prosaic strings from within heaven’s gate—awake to the fact that another vehicle than Venus’ dove-drawn car

may be expected any moment to stop at her door; awake, too, to the probability of Ellen's ear at the keyhole.

'You must not stay any longer,' she says, almost harshly; 'you must go.'

'Go! *Already?*'

In neither of their visions of reunion has so ugly a sentence found place; and the woman feels it with a stab, that yet takes nothing from the strenuousness of her insistence.

'Yes, yes; at once! I am—expecting—a—*a friend.*'

'Clarendon?'

'*Clarendon!*'

Once again, the friend, the more than friend, the brother of the soul, is hastily offered up a holocaust to appease the lover's pangs.

'Who, then?'

E 'is desperately critical moment,

she has time for a prick of pleasure at the straightforward command of the tone, which seems to take possession of her life and actions. It redoubles her dislike to mentioning the name of the expected visitor, but there is no time to be lost; Frances is already ten minutes overdue; and in face of such a crisis, drastic measures are imperative.

‘It is—Miss Etheredge.’

‘*Miss Etheredge! His sister?*’

‘Yes, yes’—breathlessly. ‘I did not ask her; but she has not been unkind to me; and she offered herself, for two nights. She wants me to—to——’

‘To—what?’

No fence ever grew smaller for being boggled over; and she goes at hers now with a rush.

‘To accompany her to London to the studio of a sculptor who is executing a monument to—to—her brother!’

By the end of this speech she is one brave blaze of scarlet, feeling the full indecency of such an announcement, made by lips still tingling with a lover's kisses. Without another word he turns to look about for his hat, and, having found it, says briefly :

‘ I see.’

He puts out his hand to bid her good-bye. Both have the impression as of a cold form in a winding-sheet, holding them asunder ; and she sees, or thinks she sees, in his face that he feels her immodesty as keenly as she. It is impossible to let him go wearing that look. Irresistibly she puts her other hand over that one of his which is holding hers, saying, with that undertone of sadness which is the substratum of all our joys, whether fierce or gentle :

‘ I did not think that I should have had to send you away—*again*.’

‘ No more did I !’

He drinks her face in one long look, gives her fingers a grip, and is gone. Not a moment too soon. Scarcely has the clang of the hall door told that he is off before Jane's ear informs her of a horse jerked up at the gate; the sound of a thrown-back hansom-flap; a pull at the bell. No moment's breathing space is to be allowed her between the boiling geyser-spring out of which she has just been drawn, and the Polar sea into which she is to be next plunged.

She springs to the looking-glass, trying with shaking fingers to restore an air of decorum to her all too apparently disarranged fringe. The mounting feet are close to the door before she realizes that she has forgotten to put on the widow's cap, which, transfixed by its corking pins, meets her eye with an air of forlorn reproach. She snatches it from its elevation on the top of the pole-screen, and

claps it on her head—*tant bien que mal*—how much more ‘mal,’ alas, than ‘bien’! and, holding her black-bordered pocket-handkerchief, stands waiting, feeling that Judas was a direct and straightforward character in comparison with herself.

Then the door opens, and the two incongruous connections are in presence of each other.

At the sight of the grim little old figure, smaller, grimmer, more wizened than ever, such a rush of associations with death-beds and disinheritance passes over Mrs. Etheredge’s soul as, coupled with her already high-piled emotions, deprives her of speech; and it is the visitor who opens the conversation.

‘My train was late.’

The matter-of-factness of this beginning restores to Jane her voice.

‘Yes, it must have been.’

‘And it was some time before I could get a porter.’

‘I am sorry. I wish that you had brought your maid. I could have put her up perfectly.’

‘Thank you ; I am quite independent of one.’

The subject ends, and for a minute or two they drop into silence, observing one another. Frances is certainly smaller than she was, more shrunk, and deeper hollowed in her sunken temples. With a pang of shame Jane realizes how much less ostentatiously black this real mourner is than her shamming self. The cloth coat and skirt, linen collar, black tie, and ruthlessly unbecoming hard hat, with its stiff quill, have been her un-deviating wear certainly for the last eight, probably for the last fifty, years.

The result of the return scrutiny made upon herself is presently evident.

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‘Are you well? You have lost your colour a good deal.’

The thought darts across Jane’s mind that it must be very lately that the recorded phenomenon has occurred, and it is with a feeling of thankfulness that it should be so, that she murmurs something about the enervating effect of the first hot days of spring. The other continues her survey with eyes that, though sunken, are still keen.

‘You have been lying down?’

‘Oh no ; I never do such a thing.’

Simultaneously the reason of the question darts across her. It must be the extreme awryness of her head-dress which has dictated it. She puts up both hands distractedly to her head, while the blood makes up for its temporary absence by galloping back with hundred-blush power into her cheeks.

* * * * *

It is the evening of the next day, after

dinner, and the severest part of an ordeal, which has exceeded her worst fears, is, or Mrs. Etheredge believes it to be, over. If she knew it, there is more yet to come.

The visit to the sculptor has been got through. The widow has seen her sister-in-law stoically regard, and even make composed criticisms upon, that white recumbent effigy, that has drawn tears, which she angrily characterizes as 'crocodile,' from her own eyes. The face has been taken from a death-mask, and the great dignifier has lent an added awe to features that in life had not lacked distinction. Frances has dryly appealed to her.

'The likeness is satisfactory on the whole, do not you think?'

But a hysterical lump in her throat has hindered the widow from answering, except by a nod. She feels herself a hypocrite of a tenfold blacker dye than before, when in the

depths of the other's hopeless eyes she sees a flash, gone as soon as come, of gratitude to her for her emotion. And yet Heaven knows that that emotion is not feigned. The unnatural amalgam of absolutely opposed, and yet intensely acute, sensations which she is experiencing has put her quite off her balance. The jumble of life and death, of boiling love and freezing remorse, in her heart, is such as not even her strong organism can stand without injury, and insulted Nature avenges the strain put upon her by a splitting nervous headache.

To her own extreme annoyance, as it seems to give one more evidence of her doublefacedness, she is unable to eat any dinner, and as they sit together afterwards Miss Etheredge briefly comments upon the fact.

‘You are a good deal upset.’

Once again, in conscience-stricken revolt

against misconception, Jane stammers her formula about spring's enervation, but the other brushes it aside :

‘ Possibly, under the circumstances I ought not to have exposed you to such a trial.’

‘ I—I—am glad I went.’

‘ I should advise you to go to bed, only that there is something I wish to say to you, and as I leave early to-morrow, it must be said to-night, or not at all.’

She pauses, evidently weighing the words of some pregnant sentence which does not come readily to her tongue, and Jane waits with a vague alarm.

‘ I have a proposition to make to you.

‘ *A proposition ?*’

The alarm has got into her voice.

‘ You are of course at liberty to take it or leave it.’

‘ Yes ?’

Miss Etheredge pauses a moment or two

longer, her spare figure dart upright on a straight-backed chair, and her eyes fixed on the glow of the fire which April's evening chilliness makes welcome. Then,

‘During the past eight months I have had a great deal of time for reflection.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘You recollect, no doubt, what was the subject of the last conversation I held with you at Etheredge?’

‘Yes.’

‘Since then I have pondered that subject very deeply, and I may say with almost incessant attention; the result is, that I now hold as an absolute certainty what I then threw out as a suggestion.’

Jane's eyes, bright with physical and mental pain, make a silent interrogation.

‘I am now convinced, beyond the power of any arguments to shake me, that my brother was not in his right mind when he

made the final disposition of his property. You combated the idea at the time——'

'I combat it now,' breaks in the other, but her sister-in-law holds up a lean hand with authority, forbidding interruption.

'Let me finish. Having arrived at this conclusion, the inevitable inference is, that were my brother permitted to come back to earth——'

She stops for a second or two, even her iron self-government failing her under the tantalizing agony of that hypothesis, but directly resumes, even ruthlessly repeating the phrase, 'If, I say, he were permitted to come back to earth, with his mind restored to that just clearness which always characterized it, his first care would be to repair the injustice which, when he was no longer himself, he had done.'

Jane sits up, gripping the arms of her chair, and with a scarlet spot on each cheek-

bone. Once more an interjection of passionate dissent tries to make its way through her lips. Once more a gesture chides her into silence.

‘But since he will not come back, since it has pleased God, contrary to the course of nature—contrary to the course of nature’—with a dreary repetition—‘to make me survive him, all that is left for me to do is to carry out what I know would be his wishes were he again with us—to make what reparation I can.’

‘There is no reparation needed.’

The warning hand is powerless to check this protest. The maker of it must utter it or suffocate.

The other wheels slowly round on her chair, so as to bring the battery of her eyes fully to bear upon the almost convulsed visage before her.

‘Are you implying that your conscience

tells you the sentence is a just one? If so, I have no more to say.'

Jane clutches her forehead, which seems literally bursting. The temptation, intensified by physical pain, to show herself up, to lay bare the blackness of her own hypocrisy, and so free herself from the torments of these overtures, bred of utter misconception, is almost irresistible. Yet enough glimmer of reason remains to make her realize that she has no more right to murder her own reputation than she would that of any other woman.

'You—you—must not wrench my words,' she says indistinctly.

'I have no wish to do so.'

Silence ensues, broken only by the drop of a bright little coal upon the hearth tiles, and the nibble of the inevitable mouse behind the wainscot. Then the old voice lifts itself again :

‘The reparation that I would propose—and I should be glad if you would not interrupt me until I have finished—is, that you should return to Etheredge.’

The request not to be interrupted is a needless one, since the proposition it goes hand-in-hand with wholly bereaves the interrupter of speech.

‘If scandal is busy with your name, your return to live at Etheredge at *my* invitation will effectually quell it.’

Still blankest silence.

‘You will be virtually mistress. I have never moved out of my own rooms. You will be fulfilling what undoubtedly would have been *his* wishes had the possession of his faculties been restored to him ; and you would be relieving me of a burden too intolerable to bear.’

A note of personal anguish pierces the frozen crust of self-control in this last clause,

and reaches even the hearer's bewildered senses. She must force out some answer, but in all her dictionary she can come at but one word, and that she gasps forth :

‘Impossible!’

The other goes on as if she had not heard :

‘It will be the one way completely to rehabilitate you ; and, as I have said, it will free me from a burden too heavy for me to bear. You will help me to carry out *his* schemes. You knew them so much better than I did, who of late years had been quite shut out from them.’

The old tone of jealous injury at being superseded is faintly audible in the last clause, but Jane has no ear for it. She has no ears for aught save the future tense, which seems to take her acceptance for granted ; is conscious of it as a man is conscious of a loose rock in act to topple over a precipice upon his head. Miss Ether-

edge has forbidden interruption, so she cannot complain of her companion's silence ; but after a while she utters a protest against it :

‘ I do not wish to hurry you, but I should have thought that such a proposal needed no long pondering over.’

The other must speak now, before the prison gates, already heard heavily rolling in their grooves, have quite shut her in.

‘ You are right ; it does not need a moment, because it is quite, *quite* out of the question.’

‘ I suppose that you have some reason to give ?’

Once again the younger woman clutches her temples. Is there any reason needed for preferring the high blue arch of love's heaven to the dank darkness of a charnel-house ? It is needless to say that this answer, though it would undoubtedly close the conversation, is not given—aloud. What

comes stammeringly after a pause is : ' When we lived together we did not get on well ; you never liked me.'

The other assents.

' That is true. I was prejudiced against you—if you will have it, jealous of you. But of late I have seen things in a different light. I have seen you bear a great wrong with dignity ; and you have exhibited more true feeling than I believed you to be possessed of. Only to-day you tried to hide your tears from me, but I saw them.'

Jane gasps. At the time her own tears, hysterical and misleading, had filled her with self-contempt. Now this allusion to them overpowers her with remorseful shame. But how can she explain them away ?

' You know,' she says, mastering herself with untold difficulty, ' that I do not agree with you as to Robert's not being in his right mind when he altered his will. He

knew perfectly what he was doing, and if he were to come back, he would do it again ; and so, though I thank you very much—all my life I shall thank you for believing in me—yet I cannot bring myself to accept what was never intended for me.'

CHAPTER X.

MISS ETHEREDGE has departed as she came, in her hard hat, and the melancholy strong-mindedness of her stiff quill. Her hostess has occupied the time since her going in writing a short letter, and crying herself to a jelly. The letter is an expiation of her crimes, the salt flood a consequence of the utter upheaval of her whole moral being. Her sister-in-law has made no effort to alter her decision when once announced, and during the short remaining time of her stay the *gêne* of their intercourse has been almost intolerable. The widow has made one final effort to break through it at the moment of

parting, as the fly which is to carry away the forlorn figure of the owner of Etheredge stops at the door.

‘Will you try to forgive me?’

‘If I did, I should not succeed,’ and so is borne off unreconciled, without one parting look back.

Jane is left on the doorstep, smitten through and through with remorse, and only the consciousness that the tears which are beginning to pour down her cheeks will render her an object of interest to the arriving butchers and bakers bids her seek the shelter of her house. She knows that goodwill towards herself is not the primary motive which has dictated the offer that she has rejected, but rather a longing to clear the memory of the worshipped dead. Yet the thought of the rebutted kindness, of the miserable old woman returning to her detested splendour and crushing responsi-

bilities with her scheme of reparation, painfully thought out through so many weary months, tossed back upon her, saturates Jane with self-reproachful pity. Her tears run down like brooks, run down upon the letter which in a fury of expiation she sits down at once to write. It consists of a very few sentences, and these curt ones :

‘You must not try to see me again, not for many months, not till the autumn. I should be much obliged if you would leave Ham. You ought not to have come on Tuesday.
‘J. E.’

It is not till she has finished this document that she remembers her ignorance of any address for its intended recipient except Lady Barnes’s. That a lady who is perfectly acquainted with her handwriting should see this specimen of it is far indeed from Mrs.

Etheredge's wish, but since the only alternative is the letter not going at all, she decides to choose the lesser of two evils.

Her tears have dripped upon the sheet, and run some of the words into each other. She knows that she ought to rewrite it, but for some reason not too nicely pried into elects to send it, blistered as it is, and is in the act of sealing it, when the lady to whose observation she is running the risk of exposing it saves her the trouble by walking in.

Jane has had so little dread of interruption, the time being the forenoon, and the place her never-to-be-invaded little back writing-room, that the attack finds her perfectly defenceless, and without any attempt at concealment she turns her disfigured face and bunged-up eyes towards the newcomer, who, with more white and less black lace than usual about her, and a tuft of lilies-of-the-valley in her bonnet, seems to have wrapped

spring's mantle about her own graceful autumn.

'I have no excuse to offer,' she says in her lagging, low voice. 'It is the kind of thing I particularly resent when it is done to myself, but he totally declined to pass the house'—patting the tiny rabbit-like skull of the Yorkshire terrier 'under her arm. 'Good heavens!'—startled into emphasis—'what a dreadful cold you have got!'

'Ye-es, dreadful.'

'And a spring or summer cold is so interminable.'

The visitor averts her eyes, and both know that she has as little belief in the catarrh as its supposed owner.

'Prinny has been suffering, too,' says his mistress, setting the little dog down with gingerly tenderness. 'I had to take him to the dentist yesterday to have his teeth scraped, and in consequence I have had the

greatest difficulty in persuading him to come out with me to-day ; he was convinced that he was going to the dentist again. And then they say that dogs have no reasoning powers.'

Mrs. Etheredge is aware that her friend is talking on in order to give her time to recover herself ; but her vexation in having been surprised in such a dishabille of mind is too acute to leave any room for gratitude.

'May I sit down?'—suiting the action to the word. 'Spring always painlessly extracts my backbone. Does not it yours? I wanted to tell you that I am going to move up to London sooner than I thought—at Easter, in fact.'

'Indeed!'

'And I have invited Mabella Clarendon to go with me.'

'Yes?'

'I like having a girl to take out. When

one has had no life worth mentioning of one's own, one has to throw one's self into other people's. Of course, a life at first hand must be a good deal more interesting.'

As she speaks she glances with pensive curiosity at the person whom she credits with possession of the advantage alluded to, but seeing no great consciousness of good luck on her blurred and blistered features, slowly averts her eyes again.

'Mabella is not quite the type of girl I should have chosen. She is—they both are—so absolutely destitute of sentiment. But, indeed, I often think'—with a sigh—'that it is extinct in every composition but my own. I shall do my best for her. I have not the least doubt that she will do the best for herself; and, at all events, she will take the dogs out walking. I am afraid'—with a drawling softness—'that that was, after all, the prime motive of my philanthropy.'

‘It never does to look too closely into one’s motives,’ says Jane, with a partially successful effort to master herself, and even surprised into a short ironic laugh.

‘You are not coming up at all this season, I suppose?’ says the visitor, encouraged by these signs of recovery to give the talk a turn more personal to Mrs. Etheredge. ‘I supposed not, not till the year, the miserable, interminable year, is out.’

She sighs heavily, and as no comment follows, she adds: ‘If it did anybody any good; but—do not be angry with me—in your case it does seem such a waste.’

‘Waste of what?’

The tone is so trenchant that Lady Barnes seems to take it as a signal of dismissal, and slowly draws herself out of the armchair over which she and her laces have billowed. But she answers the question with a little sinking of her voice:

‘Waste of—*summer*.’

They are both standing now, two tall women with their eyes on a level, but not looking at one another. Lady Barnes’ gaze, slowly roving, has lit on the letter which, escaped from its writer’s hand, has fallen face downwards on the blotter.

‘I see that you have followed my example—that you have taken to sealing your letters.’

The attack leaves its object speechless.

‘When I gave the advice, I remember, I was writing to a friend—a far-away friend in California. Apropos, he has been staying with me.’

The thrust is a direct one, but after a moment’s flinching Jane parries it by as direct a reply :

‘I know. He came to call upon me. By - the - by’—a slight drawing in of the breath—‘could you give me his address? I have to write to him.’

For a moment Lady Barnes rolls her large, melancholy eyes full upon Mrs. Etheredge, as if calling upon them to confirm the incredible evidence given by her ears ; but it is only for a moment, and there is no ill-mannered inquisitiveness in the careless voice with which she replies :

‘ The Travellers’ will always find him.’

She looks round for the long Spanish lace scarf that she had laid aside on entering, but having found and enfolded her long neck in it, still tarries, although Prinny, overdressed as usual, but to-day in a suit of apple-green ribbons to match the vernal season, stands looking hard at her through his silvery forelock, with eyes that unmistakably say : ‘ I am a very well-bred dog, but I cannot stand the boredom of this kind of thing much longer ; it is worse than the dentist.’ Lady Barnes has got so far in farewell as to be holding her friend’s hand,

but she adds a postscript to her good-bye :

‘Do not catch any more—colds,’ she says, looking with an air of vexation at the other’s still disfigured visage. ‘Nothing is worth—catching cold about.’

She falls into a kind of abstraction for some moments, and then adds irrelevantly :

‘For the autumn I have a plan.’

Then she goes. Her intrusion was irksome and her departure a relief, leaving Jane free to return to her expiation and her remorse. She does this at once, tracing the words ‘John Miles, Esq., Travellers’ Club,’ with an unfaltering hand and a new quill; yet she is shocked to find how often across the black night of her repentance there flashes a silver streak of wonder as to what Lady Barnes’s autumn project can be, and whom it involves.

By the afternoon her tears are dried, her

appearance restored with that miraculous completeness which only youth and perfect vigour can effect at short notice, and she is able to receive with composed interest the Miss Clarendons' great tidings, which they both arrive bursting with eagerness to impart.

'Is not it a stroke of luck for Mabella?' cries the elder sister, without a tinge of envy in her tone, giving Mrs. Etheredge cause once more to admire the perfect harmony and good understanding with which the two girls conduct their rather uphill chase after life's prizes—'to be taken out for a whole season, and so well, by a person who is sure not to introduce her to anyone who is not all right.'

Mabella sits by in silent radiance, but presently a very slight cloud crosses her brow.

'I only hope that it may not involve me in

more expense than I can afford. Of course, one must be decently turned out ; and gloves, even if one has them cleaned three times, are a frightful item. Rich people are so thoughtless ; they never realize what half-crowns mean to one, and are so apt to ask one to lend them five shillings, and forget to pay it back.'

'I always make a point of never having any small change about me,' replies Flora discreetly.

Jane listens with a dim amusement. She has grown so used to the Miss Clarendons' hints that they no longer cause her any embarrassment, and on the present occasion she is aware that it is the force of habit rather than any definite hope of result that dictates Mabella's complaints.

Her mind is beginning to wander from the dialogue, when it is brought back to it with a jerk by a speculative remark ad-

dressed in the shape of a consolation by the elder to the younger sister.

‘ You will probably see a great deal of the Californian, and he gives one the idea of being just the sort of man who would be good for any number of opera-boxes and theatre-tickets.’

‘ Perhaps so,’ returns the junior, quite willing to be reassured, and break out into full blaze of satisfaction again ; ‘ particularly as, according to Lady Barnes, he has lately come unexpectedly into a good deal of money.’

Jane gives a start, which to herself seems enormous, but is probably not perceptible to other people, since the two girls continue to discuss with their usual strange candour their chances of success in raids upon Mr. Miles’ pocket. Mrs. Etheredge listens in a kind of odious dream. How much more these harpies know about him than she does ! She had

not given him time to tell her of this new wealth of his. So their cases are reversed: it is he who is Dives now and she Lazarus. The thought is foolishly bitter to her that perhaps after all her wholesale sacrifice will not be very much felt by either of them. For months she has been glorying in the knowledge of having stripped herself bare of everything for his sake, and if he is to re-endow her with the luxuries she has forfeited, her self-immolation will end but tamely.

Joined with this pang is a sense of boiling indignation at hearing him made the subject of projected exploitation by her young friends. The strength of this double emotion, coupled with the necessity of keeping it well under hatches, renders her speech so curt and her brow so clouded that the Miss Clarendons, though not thin-skinned, feel it advisable to withdraw before tea is brought in, quite

contrary to their intentions, and to that golden rule which teaches them, wherever possible, to utilize anyone's kitchen fire but their own.

Their brother is Mrs. Etheredge's next visitor, but he does not appear till the following day. It is past five o'clock, and she is sitting before her tea-table, but has forgotten to fill her cup. Yet there is no sign of other occupation near her. She is perfectly idle. He glances at her with sharp solicitude, feeling the fever of the white hand that absently lends itself to him.

'I came to ask how it went off?'

'How what went off?'

During the past twenty-four hours Miss Etheredge and her own remorse have grown blue with distance — mind, heart, senses drenched in the memory of the mad ecstasy that just preceded them.

'Why, Miss Etheredge's visit.'

The alarmed surprise in his face brings her to as out of a swoon.

‘Oh—it went off.’

‘Well?’

She shakes her head.

‘Tant bien que mal?’

‘Not even that. As *mal* as possible.’

He puts no other question, recognizing from long experience of her moods that in her present one the best chance of gaining information from her is not to ask it. The result justifies his hope.

‘She wanted me to go back to Etheredge with her.’

‘To pay her a visit?’

‘No ; to live.

‘And you refused?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was that wise?’

‘Probably not.’

She pours him out a cup of tea, and he

takes two or three sips before he speaks again.

‘Nothing could have rehabilitated you as completely as that would have done.’

She pauses.

‘That is what Frances said ; you both used the same word—*rehabilitated*. Until you remind me of it, I am apt to forget that I stand in such need of whitewashing.’

He passes the reproach by in silence.

‘Was your refusal absolute—final?’

‘Yes.’

He gives a sigh that sounds half impatient.

‘Then there is no use saying anything more about it?’

‘None.’

She moves restlessly, angrily uneasy beneath his disapproval.

‘If you would take the trouble to put yourself for a moment into my position, you might perhaps have a glimmer of compre-

hension of what an enormity you are advocating.'

'I am not quite sure that I know what your position is.'

She glances at him with the furtive fear of conscious wrong-doing. Is it possible that he can have heard? His face does not reassure her. It is paler than its always pale wont, and she knows by experience that he is bracing himself to say something disagreeable.

'I had two motives for coming to-day. I have already told you one.'

'Yes?'

'The other is——'

She throws out one of her hands as if to stop him.

'Are you sure that I shall like to hear it?'

'Not at all sure; but that does not make any difference. My second motive was to warn you that Mr. John Miles is, or until

yesterday was, visiting in this neighbourhood.'

He sees her hands tormenting each other under the ledge of the tea-table.

'You might have spared yourself the trouble. I knew it already.'

'My sisters told you?'

'No.'

He draws a vexed breath.

'You met him out of doors, without any preparation? That is what I feared might happen.'

For a moment she hesitates. It would be much pleasanter to allow him to continue in this belief, and there is no reason why he should ever be undeceived. But the habit of truth-telling, when once contracted, is almost as inveterate as that of lying.

'You are not happy in your guesses to-day. I saw him *here*.'

'*Here?*'

‘Yes, here, in this room.’

The confession seems to knock the young man out of time, and intimately as she knows him, the tone in which his next inquiry comes is new to her.

‘He came uninvited?’

‘Yes.’

‘Forced himself upon you, without giving you any choice in the matter—in *your* circumstances?’

‘You said just now that you did not know what my circumstances were. There was no *forcing*. I received him as I should have received any other caller.’

The recollection of how extremely unlike the demeanour of an ordinary caller that of the one in question had been cuts across her face like the mark of a red whip-lash. Apparently he has no more questions to put, and were she wise she would acquiesce in his silence; but of this exercise of self-

control the long habit of unbosoming herself to him has rendered her incapable.

‘If you have any comments to make, pray do not think it necessary to withhold them,’ she says, with a most unsuccessful effort at light indifference.

‘Do you really wish to hear my comment?’

‘Certainly, if you wish to make one.’

Her voice is not very steady, and already she rues her own permission, but it is too late. They are both rather breathless by now, and have by common consent risen to their feet, as if no sitting person could hurl such thunderbolts as are now about to hurtle through the air.

‘Well, then, it is this: I think it was the action of a *bounder*!’

Clarendon is very little addicted to the employment of slang, and its use in crises of potent emotion must always have a strange incongruity. The unaccustomed and offen-



sive noun now bounces from his lips with the force of a bomb. It is scarcely a figure of speech to say that the object of the projectile is blown to pieces by it. Several seconds elapse before she can collect the scattered fragments of her consciousness and piece them together enough to say in a strangled undertone :

‘ I—do—not think I can have heard right. Will you be good enough to repeat what you said ?’

He looks at her with despair in his heart ; looks right into the irreconcilable wrath of her blue eyes, staring enormous out of a linen-white face. But his ships are in flames behind him, and there is nothing for it but a desperate onward march.

‘ I said that I think—it was the action of a—*bounder* !’

She would be deaf indeed did the steely clearness of his utterance not reach her ears

now. That it has done so is abundantly evident. A moment ago she had seemed scarcely able to articulate; but mind is stronger than matter, and to the compulsion of her will the reluctant organ of speech obeys.

‘If these are the terms in which you see fit to allude to those who honour me with their friendship, I must at least request that you choose some other place than my house to do it in.’

He can never afterwards remember, on all the myriad occasions when in wretched solitude he fights the battle o’er again, whether she adds to her dismissal the crowning insult of pointing to the door. Such a red mist of ruin involves the plain that details are lost. The next thing of which he is conscious is that he is in the roadway, though whether ejected through the window, kicked down-stairs, or by the simple process of putting one

foot before another till he gets there, he could never tell, though when he is once again capable of reflection, the last of the three methods seems to him to have the greater degree of probability in its favour.

As for her, the storm of her wrath upholds her on its furious pinions through the afternoon, and it is not till night falls, and the last London post brings her this line in a handwriting which, though she has scarcely ever seen it, her whole being leaps to recognize: 'I have no will but yours.—J. M.,' that the dreary feeling crawls over her of how clear of pieces she has swept her board!

CHAPTER XI.

LADY BARNES' lackadaisical consolation, extracted from the weariness of her own experience of new widowhood, has proved its truth. The interminable first year is in Mrs. Etheredge's case ended. The summer has walked away. Jane's is, at all events, not the one in which, according to Rosalind's category, time gallops.

The four months that have gone by since that April which had proved of so earth-quaky a character have had but little outward incident to mark them. With what crowding riot of inward events, whose stage is the narrow area of a woman's leaping heart,

Jane herself only knows how well they are furnished. Her correspondence is small. Since the avalanche of condolences which, before the brand affixed upon her by her husband's will became public property, had swept over her, former acquaintances have for the most part not thought it necessary to communicate further with her. A few show a disposition to keep up friendly relations, but she holds to them slackly. With all of them, with all that they represent and recall, she has for ever done.

Once, in a fresh spurt of remorse, she has written to Miss Etheredge, but has received no answer. Perhaps, since her letter did not contain any faintest sign of going back from her attitude of utter refusal, none was to be expected, and she is illogically relieved when none comes.

By the removal of Clarendon from her existence, the one check that had ever

served as a drag-wheel upon the headlong rush of her passion is destroyed. Since the day when she had so effectually silenced the voice that on so many occasions during the last six years has led her quietly back to the forsaken track of reason and common-sense she has abandoned herself without an effort to the monotonous tyranny of her one idea.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that she now never thinks of anything else. And yet in a way, too, though she sometimes angrily tells herself that his absence is a relief, and that she is well rid of his irksome schooling, she does grievously miss her friend—misses him in small, shabby ways of which she is ashamed, in his interposition between her and little vulgar troubles; misses him, too, in higher senses, in the stimulus he had given to her intellect, and the pleasant exercise of brain that her help in his work had afforded her. All share in

that work she has now repudiated, having sent back her unfinished sheet of MS. and his books of reference without a word ; and he has restored whatever properties of hers linger in his study in equal silence.

Mrs. Etheredge has made but few acquaintances in Richmond, nor does she much encourage the not very pressing overtures of those few. What profit is there in knitting ties with a place her connection with which is so fleeting? And what could common acquaintances do but irk her in distracting her from her splendid visions of the near future? The park is all the confidant she needs, and she watches with rapture its progress through the phases of milky thorn groups and burning rhododendron belts, to the full summer consummation of gallant oaks panoplied in universal green.

She was glad when the cuckoo came, because she knew that the arrival of summer's

pursuivant proves autumn to be a step nearer ; gladder still when he goes, telling her that that autumn is now at hand. There are days when even the park's heart seems too public an arena, and she lies hour long in a wicker-chair in the tiny by-courtesy-garden at the back of the house, which replaces for her the unregretted pleasaunces and fountains of Etheredge.

She lies there so still late into the night sometimes that the numerous cats which grace the neighbourhood caterwaul around her unconcerned, and through their din a nightingale throws her down from some near tree-top exultations that seem but her own better worded.

Of Flora Clarendon, solitary like herself, though with a much more gregarious solitude, she has to see something. The first visit paid by Clarendon's sister after Jane's break with him has filled her with the alarm

of being called upon for some explanation of what must be their evident twoness, but, happily, one article of Miss Clarendon's code of all-rightness is not to seem inquisitive. Though Jane divines the puzzled darkness that envelops Flora's mind as to the sudden cessation of intercourse between two persons who had been all but inseparable, there is nothing offensively probing in her slight way of introducing the subject.

'I am quite lost without Mabella ; and I miss Willy, too—in a way. He has taken rooms in London, as no doubt you know.' Mrs. Etheredge sees no necessity for proclaiming her ignorance of the fact alluded to, and gives only a slight nod, that may mean anything. 'He says he must see his book through the press.'

Jane is lying back in her chair, and with lifted chin stares vacantly up at the sky, seen through the droop of laburnum bunches that

are passing from the poetry of gold flames to the prose of dark-green pods. A pang is at her heart. *His* book! *Their* book! It is with an effort that she presently says :

‘ Yes, I suppose it will soon be out now.’

‘ I suppose so ’ — indifferently — ‘ though, indeed, you know a great deal more than I do about it. He is an odd, secretive creature, and is not at all communicative to us about himself. To tell the honest truth, I am afraid we never can get up much interest in his work.’ A moment later, as if to justify her own lack of sympathy : ‘ He would not like it if we did.’

‘ Would not he ?’

Jane has not changed her attitude, and the pinch of pain has tightened its hold on her heart. Of all the many sacrifices she has laid upon the altar of her love, how incomparably the greatest this last has been ! With exulting passion she has brought the

others, but struggle and rueful tears have accompanied this.

‘It is strange that you should understand him better than we, who are his own flesh and blood ; but, as Mabella always says, he is a “sport.”’

There is an air of comfortable finality about the tone in which she closes the subject with her junior’s well-worn epigram, and sitting upright, with a sudden mindfulness of her back-hair, and of the injury likely to be inflicted upon her whalebone panoply by lolling, looks alertly round.

‘How pretty you have managed to make this little garden!’

Relieved at the change of theme, Jane also sits up.

‘By the simple and childlike process of turning pot-plants loose upon it’—glancing without enthusiasm at the spurious success of her forget-me-nots and white daisies.

A touch of gloom clouds Flora's good spirits.

'I can never *look* at a pot-plant.'

The perfect candour of the Miss Clarendons as to their finances engenders a like candour in their acquaintance, and it is without any sense of being rude or intrusive that Jane rejoins :

'But this year you must be feeling quite a Cræsus, with Mabella off your hands.'

Flora shakes her head.

'Mabella costs a great deal more than she would if she had stayed at home. I do not blame her for it. Of course it *may* prove to have been well worth the outlay ; but she must be properly turned out, and as far as I can discover Lady Barnes has hitherto given her very little help. As Mabella says, well-off people are so thoughtless in those kind of ways.'

Used as she is to the Miss Clarendons'

artless greed, this new and naïve expression of it staggers Mrs. Etheredge.

‘But she does not complain,’ continues Flora presently, in perfect innocence of the impression she is giving, and, indeed, taking for granted her companion’s sympathy, ‘and in other ways she has been very fortunate. She has come across several old friends, and also made new ones. There is no doubt’—thoughtfully—‘that in all matters relating to spending and so forth men are *far* pleasanter to deal with than women.’

The concluding generality clears away any doubt as to the sex of Mabella’s benefactors. Jane listens in careless silence tinged with distaste, but her companion’s next sentence has the gift of doing away with the first feeling, the carelessness, however it may heighten the second.

‘Men who have knocked about the world much—in the colonies and that kind of

thing—are always particularly open-handed, do not you think? I suppose their money comes lightly and goes lightly.'

'I am afraid I have never given the subject a thought.'

She speaks dryly, and has drawn up her neck, which, though not as long as Lady Barnes', is of a very handsome extent when reared for purposes of snubbing; but despite this display of indifferent dignity, an odious suspicion has crawled into her heart. To whom do these oblique encomiums point? The question that would clear up this doubt sticks in her throat. She cannot stoop to ask it, and without descending to further particulars Miss Clarendon rises to go.

'Well, I am afraid I must run away. I promised Lady Barnes to go to Ham every two or three days to look after the dogs—those that she has left behind. She took

four with her. I pity the poor people whose house she is renting. But she thinks the rest of the pack will be breaking their hearts for her. Too silly, is not it?’

‘It is an unfair division of labour, certainly,’ says Jane with irony. ‘But perhaps next year the cases will be reversed. Mabella will be consoling the dogs, while *you* will be finding out weak spots in South African hearts.’

The flier sounds to her own ears both tame and spiteful, but Flora, one of whose many accomplishments is a power of ignoring incivilities which it would be inconvenient to see, answers with serene matter-of-factness :

‘I do not think Mabella knows any South Africans ; and as to next year, there is not much use thinking of that, is there ? The whole situation may be changed. Mabella may be married. She is in particularly good looks this year.’

The visitor departs, promising to look in soon again, and the visatee, accepting the assurance in silence, returns to solitude and her wicker-chair. She can resume the bodily attitude in which the tailor-made arrival of half an hour ago had found her, but can she again take up the position of blissful reverie out of which that arrival had shaken her? She is not long in discovering the impossibility. To sit still at all under the prick of those gadfly words with which her late guest has stung her ears is out of the question, and, springing to her feet, she begins to hurry to and fro, up and down, the baffling brevity of her gravel walk.

So they have got hold of him! Mabella is fleecing him, as in her own very hearing they had planned. There was at least no disguise about their intentions. Harpies! The receiver and the thief! Taking advantage of the noble openness and generosity of

his nature to *exploiter* him, make their vulgar profit out of him! Will he fall an easy prey?

She pauses in her torrent of inward invective, pulled up by the startling thought of how very little she knows of him, his character, or qualities, how handicapped she is by her ignorance in any endeavour to estimate his probable conduct in this or that conjunction. But the disquieting reflection is soon erased by the flashing happiness of the thought how many sweet and high discoveries on the large continent of his heart and mind their reunion will bring her. That she should be jealous of Mabella is a suggestion which would seem to her worthy of only the scornfullest ridicule. She might as well be jealous of the street beggar who whines a halfpenny out of him, and by-and-by her indignation burns itself down into contempt.

Poor Willy! What would he say if he knew? It is the first time since the cataclysm which drowned their friendship that she has applied so lenient an adjective to him in her thoughts. It seems insensibly to lead her into a softer view, and, without intending it, her mind goes slipping back over the past, the years of close comradeship, in which his part had been all give, and hers almost all take; over the sacrifices for which she had nearly always forgotten to say 'thank you,' and the tiresome hourly services which both of them had considered overpaid by a smile.

And that the whole fabric which seemed reared for eternity should have been levelled to the earth by a word—one word! But *what* a word! She says it over under her breath, as if it were too horrible to pronounce aloud, 'Boulder!' and in an instant her wrath is alight again. Yes, she had done

well to be angry, to throw aside for ever and at any cost one who could so blaspheme. And, after all, there is a joy, if a bitter one, in this worthy completion of her pyramid of sacrifice.

She has given him—her beloved—everything, everything now—everything but the crowning gift of herself. Yet from this height of exaltation she presently finds herself dropping into speculations as to how he who was of late her daily companion gets on without her—he who, unlike her, has no supreme good to dwarf into invisibility all lesser ills. His home counts for nothing—the home where he is regarded as a ‘sport.’ He has never been a man of many friends, two absorptions ruling and filling his life: herself and his work.

Well, he has his work still. But has not she spoiled that, too, for him? Has not she so mixed herself with it in his mind and

thoughts that he will be unable to disentangle her from it? There is no satisfactory answer to this question, and by-and-by he recedes into the background of her mind; and even thence, as the days go by, is almost expelled by the relentless dragon that ever more and more devours her soul.

As much as it is possible she has shirked Flora's society, with a dread unspoken even to herself of being made the recipient of further triumphal confidences on the subject of Mabella's raids. But with all her care, she cannot avoid the worse trial of being brought face to face with Mabella herself, since towards the end of June she comes down to spend a Saturday to Monday with her sister.

'It is quite pleasant to get a breath of country air,' says the stranger, as the two girls sit in Mrs. Etheredge's little shaded drawing-room on Sunday afternoon, while

under the lowered outside blinds gaily-dressed shop-girls and shopmen are seen two-and-twoing it parkwards, and bicycle bells sound ceaselessly warning as they fly past in the bright heat. She says it with a little blasé air, adding, 'Of course you are hot here, too, but it is much fresher.'

This new identification of herself with the Metropolis and kindly condescension towards the suburbs would have made Jane smile, had not all feeling of the ridiculous been swallowed up in a senseless dread of what she may be compelled to hear of Mabella's successes; in an equally senseless and stronger desire to hinder the girl from pronouncing a name whose utterance by such lips is more than she herself could endure.

'You know that you are longing to get back,' cries Flora, regarding her junior with undisguised satisfaction; 'that you only came down because Lady Barnes went to

Ham for Sunday. She is'—turning towards Mrs. Etheredge—'having a truly splendid time.'

'I have not come in for very many balls,' replies Mabella, as if to temper the exaggeration of this glorious statement. 'Lady Barnes is not in a bally set, but otherwise I have not done badly.'

'I am quite envious of all the pretty things she has been given,' continues the elder sister in a most unenvious voice. 'Show Mrs. Etheredge your bangle. It has a real genuine scarab in it.'

Mabella complies, nothing loath; and, drawing the trinket alluded to off her wrist, holds it out for Jane's inspection.

'It was a Philippine,' she murmurs.

A slight mist has filmed for a moment Mrs. Etheredge's vision, but it is not too thick to hinder her from realizing both the beauty and the costliness of the ornament.

‘It is charming,’ she answers, returning it to its owner, and is at once aware of a sense of disappointment in both sisters at her adding no question as to the donor’s name.

They have to go away at last, without having been given any opportunity of producing it.

Much later in the afternoon Mrs. Etheredge hastens through the carriages and hansoms that a fine summer Sunday brings swarming round the Star and Garter, through the bicyclists and the sauntering pairs, through the crowd of visitors blandly seated on chairs about the Richmond Gate, through the park, ever growing less crowded as she gets further away from the Cockney centre of the Royal borough, quickening her pace as she speeds across Ham Common, till she stands at the door of her friend Lady Barnes’ house.

An instinct, vaguely goading, has driven

her thither, the instinct to provide herself with an antidote for Mabella's bangle, before in the watches of the unescapable night she has to face a fact which as yet she has scarcely trusted herself to look at.

Lady Barnes is trailing about her garden, dreamy and lacey as usual, happy in the company of her whole reunited pack. The meeting of the separated halves of the family has not been altogether peaceful, the London dogs having, like Mabella, come back rather airified, and there has been a good deal of growling, and contemptuous walking round each other, and haughty smelling.

'I heard only by chance that you were here.'

There is a faint tinge of reproach in the visitor's tone, and the answering explanation is scarcely one.

'I have no belief in Eliza, the housemaid I leave in charge here. When last I came

down the dogs were so unnaturally good that I felt sure she bullied them. I spoke very seriously to her, and this time, I am glad to say, they are as disobedient as ever, and have done even more mischief than when I am at home.' She laughs with a delicate relish of her own folly, adding : 'Have you seen Mabella?'

'Yes. How extremely well she is looking!'

The other gazes speculatively at the garden border, heavily odorous with white and orange lilies, along which they are strolling.

'H'm! Did it strike you that she had taken to—*illuminating* a little?'

'It had not occurred to me. I only noticed a general radiance.'

The speaker awaits the comment that may follow with a disproportional apprehension. It does not hurry.

‘I do not know of any particular cause for radiance that she has got.’

‘Has not the venture—the season I mean—been a success, then?’ with a rather difficult laugh.

Lady Barnes always speaks slowly, but to-day the trail of her sentences seems intolerable to her listener’s ears.

‘Oh yes, I suppose she thinks so.’

‘And to you?’

Again the response loiters on its road.

‘I have not troubled myself much about her. She has catered for herself surprisingly.’

There is a little silence, the hearer pondering what area this last statement may cover, and Lady Barnes resumes :

‘You know I always told you that she was not quite the sort of girl I should have chosen ; and her methods when one sees them at work are perhaps a little trying ; but

she quite does her duty by the dogs.' A few more trailing steps over the gravel, and she adds: 'I wish I had known *you* when you were a girl.'

The aspiration is accompanied by a gentle caressing pressure of Jane's pendant hand. Lady Barnes has often before held her friend's fingers in hers in her moments of frequent expansion, and that friend has always been embarrassed by the endearment, and glad when it was over. To-day she is scarcely conscious of it.

'I never was a girl. I married at seventeen and a half.'

'I know, I know'—with a little shudder. 'How terrible to begin life with such a colossal blunder! But at least in your case it is not irreparable. Reparable and to be repaired.' She smiles softly as if to herself. 'What a different thing the season would have been if *you* had been with me. Different

to me—and to—others.’ She drops her voice a little. ‘At least I have had the pleasure of talking a great deal about you.’

Jane laughs with a touch of the hysteric.

‘I am afraid you must have wearied your friends with the subject.’

Lady Barnes shakes her head with delicate emphasis.

‘There was not much fear of that. I chose an audience to whom I knew that it was the one topic in the world.’

Both have paused in their walk. The June dusk is falling soft as swan’s-down, and from the garden trees birds’ throats are emptying their good-night music. Once again they seem to Jane to be voicing her story.

‘I want you to keep September quite clear for me. I have a plan.’

CHAPTER XII.

SEPTEMBER has come. The mountain of time that had interposed between Jane and the fruition of her joy is levelled with the plain. She has nothing to do but go up and possess the Promised Land. To stand on such a Pisgah is enough to unsteady a stronger brain than hers, and sometimes Mrs. Etheredge feels the want of a railing to hold on by. Nothing any longer stands between her and her Elysium but a railway journey and a small belt of northern sea. To-morrow she sets off for Scotland, and in Scotland, beyond the reach of intrusive eyes, he awaits her.

She has bid good-bye to the Miss Clarendons, and stood without flinching the display of Mabella's ill-gotten gains. Her tweed gowns and wet-heather-defying leather petticoats are packed, and the last of the many suns, whose wheels her desire has speeded, is stooping downwards to his rest.

Some small errand has taken her to the town, and on her homeward way she turns into the Terrace Gardens, and, leaning on the balustrade that runs along the top of the steeply-falling slope, gazes over the play of the fountain at the nobly-grouped old trees below her, at the flaunt of jewelled flower-beds, at the river-peep almost hid in foliage, at the gay frolics of the white-frocked children, all gloriously engoldened in the mist that will later drown, but now only heightens, the universal comeliness. The gold haze is within her as well as without. Through it the sauntering figures

in the garden come and go : some blissfully linked lover-wise, some guiding baby steps, some sunning old age on seats.

Under none of these heads classes itself a solitary figure slowly climbing the rustic steps of the ascent from the river towards her, a figure that her eye at first takes in with only the happy vague benevolence which to-day enwraps all created things for her. It has not, however, dwelt upon the slight form rather inertly mounting for more than a second before its expression of dreamy beatitude vanishes. The figure is Clarendon's, whom at their last meeting she had metaphorically kicked out of her presence. Had the recognition not been mutual her course would have been easy, a swift and unobserved withdrawal. But she knows that consciousness of her has sprung into his heart, at the same instant as awareness of him had leapt into her own.

She sees him stop dead short, then resume mastery of himself, and without giving any outward sign of having seen her, continue his upward course. She realizes at once that that course will not take him absolutely past her, as his walk, swerving to the right, gains the level and the terrace by a final flight of steps without approaching her point of vantage more nearly.

She draws a long breath. What an ordeal she has escaped! It will be best to stay where she is and feign as he has done. She gazes with as absent an air as she can assume over the evening loveliness, and it is not till her calculations tell her that his back must be safely turned to her that she ventures to send a look in pursuit of him. That look carries back a shock to her heart. What a slouch he has gained since they parted! Has there been no one to tell him to hold up his head? And why has he had

his clothes made so much too big for him?

As if in answer to the unuttered question, or from a like impulse to hers, he too, just before passing out of eyeshot, also turns, and, meeting her gaze, once more stands stock - still. Unconsciously at first, but presently guided by her brain, her feet begin to move towards him, a sudden impulse of forgiveness, ruth, and re-roused affection driving her.

Standing on her Himalayan height of happiness, can she not afford to be magnanimous? Her bliss is god-like; let her, then, also exercise the god-like faculty of pardon. When she sets off to-morrow, let there be no one creature on this kindly, beautiful earth with whom she is not in peace and goodwill.

As she reaches him her hand goes out, and enough of the old matter-of-courseness

that he should accept her cuffs and pats with equal readiness remains in her mind to keep her from any disquieting doubt as to whether he will take it. To her petrification there is a moment of perceptible hesitation before he very slightly and formally touches it. She will have more to forgive than she had calculated upon, since—whatever else he may be—his suddenly erect figure, steady eyes, and look of coldly polite inquiry, tell her that he is not repentant. She had expected to have her heroic overture received with an almost overpowering gratitude, and the entire lack of demand for the virtues she had meant to have exhibited disconcerts her for a while past recovery. Her quondam friend makes not the smallest effort to help her. It is only after a choking pause of humiliation that she finds the bald phrase: ‘I did not know that you were in Richmond.’

‘And I was told that you were to leave it this morning.’

He takes so little pains to hide the fact that the two things stand in the relation of cause and effect, that the temper with whose quick spurts he has been often made familiar of yore now gives a smart flash.

‘You will not have long to wait. I am off at cock-crow to-morrow.’

The silence with which he takes her outbreak of petulance is, as she feels, of a very different quality from that in which he had been wont indulgently to await the return of her good-humour.

There is a pause, two cross-currents running counter to each other in her mind—the one an angry surprise at the failure of her overture, the other a deepened ruth in realizing the havoc that their breach has worked in him. He may brave it out, but *how* he has felt it! He looks ten years

older, and the tell-tale hollows in his thinned face have hurried him before his time into middle age. A sense of shame that the bolt which has scarred and withered him has left no smallest cicatrice on herself drives her mortified vanity into the background, or perhaps appeases it so fully as to enable her to keep waving her olive-branch before his unresponsive eyes.

‘I have been here all the summer—alone. One wants a change after having been here all the summer—alone.’

‘Yes?’

‘A friend——’

She hesitates a moment, the impulse to spare his susceptibilities by a generality checked by the reflection that his sisters will have doubtless made such caution useless.

‘A friend—Lady Barnes, in fact—has taken the shooting at Strath Glen up in the

Hebrides, and has invited me to stay with her.'

The complete composure of his slight sign of assent tells her that her news is no news to him; and the wonder as to whether he is as well informed as to her fellow-guests as he is with regard to her hostess flurries her into going on.

'One cannot stand this Thames Valley climate for more than a certain time with impunity.'

'Has your health suffered?'

The words express a perfectly correct solicitude, but she divines the depth of their irony. How he must hate her for her colour, for that insolent bloom of which every passing eye keeps her informed! Her mental discomfort seems to her as if it must be so visible as to render her and her companion conspicuous, and without answering his question, she hurriedly makes a propo-

sition which involves a further urging upon him of her hitherto unaccepted emblem of peace.

‘It is very crowded this evening. I think there are to be fireworks later. Would you mind walking with me towards my door? We could talk more comfortably.’

She offers the suggestion with a good deal less confidence than had accompanied her proffered hand. Once again Clarendon hesitates, and once again, just as mortification and re-rising indignation are beginning to get the better of her, he yields. But it is clear that he means to leave to her the onus of making whatever conversation is to be made.

‘So the book is out.’

She uses the definite article, from a species of shyness of seeming to claim her share in it, the share which he used to be so emphatic in acknowledging.

‘Yes.’

‘The press notices—I had them all sent to me—were practically unanimous.’

‘I did not read them.’

She gives a little baffled, half-angry laugh.

‘Did not you read the diplomas that the foreign Universities sent you, either?’

He does not reply, and, with a galled feeling that she is envenoming instead of bettering the situation, she ceases her efforts for a minute or two. Only for a minute or two. The desire to be at peace with him is stronger than any irritation that he can or will be able to excite. From his point of view he has also something to forgive, and out of her enormous riches she can surely spare him the gift of a little patience. So that the voice which conveys her next words to him is as sweet and conciliatory as the words themselves.

‘I must thank you for your very graceful allusion to my help in the preface. I was

very much flattered, though you did not mention my name.'

'I could not mention it without your permission.'

The reason why he could not ask for that permission is so hideously present to them both, that for awhile Mrs. Etheredge is thrown on her beam ends.

'Perhaps I am mistaken,' she says at last. 'Perhaps you were alluding to someone else, some other coadjutor.'

'I had no other.'

They have reached her door and come to a standstill. The shadows are beginning to stretch themselves out from their puny beginnings, but for the most part the great wash of gold is still over everything. It is washing over Jane's heart, too, in a tide of joy and universal gentleness. That sun must not and shall not, if by any concession she can avert it — any concession that

involves only humiliation to herself, and no blasphemy against her god—go down upon her estranged friend's wrath. She glances timidly, yet with resolution, first at the door from which that friend had been ejected, and then at the thin relentlessness of his face.

‘ Will you come in ?’

There is a quiver in the beseechment of her voice, and her hand half goes out to draw him within her little iron gate. Never can she have looked more charming than in this attitude of dewy-eyed deprecation and entreaty ; and yet, as he considers her—hitherto he has not tormented himself with more than that first glance — his heart hardens against her.

Her weeds are gone, for ever gone, and though she is still decorously black, as a widow in her second year of mourning should be, yet the rose and flame of dawn, were

she clad in them, could not express an elastic joy and gaiety more vividly than does her sombre yet contradictorily cheerful garb. Clarendon is not a man to whom woman's clothes as a rule say anything, but to-day no man-milliner could be more aware than he of the airy nothing of a bonnet lightly posed on the fair hair ; of the perfectly-hung thin skirt, softly betraying the secret of its silk lining in an expansive *frou-frou* ; of the careful coquetry of shoes and gloves. If he were to reflect a moment, he would know that it is not a costume adapted for the Hebrides ; that Mr. John Miles will probably never see it. But he does not, and the consciousness that each exquisite detail is addressed to the absent lover runs like a needle through his heart.

‘ Thanks, no.’

The denial is unsoftened by any excuse, and her face falls and flushes at its curtness.

‘It is good-bye, then?’

‘Good-bye.’

In complete acquiescence as to this being the end, he turns to go, but something in her will not suffer it. Mixed with the sincerity of her reawakened affection is the superstitious feeling that it will be ill-omened for one jarring note to mar the peaceful harmonies of that concert which is to pipe and harp her into her Eden.

There is humility in the pleading ‘When I am back perhaps you will come’ with which she seeks to arrest him. Perhaps he knows her well enough to divine the alloy of selfishness that adulterates the pure metal of her amende, to divine that even her efforts to be friends with him have taken their ply from her own mastering absorption. He only repeats her words in an unqualifiable voice :

‘When you are back!’

‘Do you think that I shall never come back? Do you think’—with an oppressed attempt at lightness—‘that I am going to “visit the bottom of the monstrous world” like Lycidas?’

It is a moment or two before he answers.

‘I do not presume to think about it.’

Then she gives up her efforts. The one discordant note must be left to jar.

* * * *

Forty-eight hours later—Mrs. Etheredge has slept at Perth *en route*—the *Lovedale* is steaming its way up the Sound of Mull. Through lashing rain and slashing wind the little frail boat has been steadily churning, and is now within sight of a white house, dimly seen through the rolling mists, backed with woods and fronted with greensward, which from Lady Barnes’ description Jane knows to be the goal of her journey.

But to be within sight of and to be within

that white house are two very different things, as she is not long in learning. Strath Glen possesses neither pier nor landing-stage, and a boat has to be daily sent out to take off letters and passengers. This fact, when she had first heard it, had caressed Jane's imagination with a sweet picture of island solitude, and fancy had bodied forth a little skiff shooting across a summer sea, oared by two vigorous arms, whose impatience to reach her would make the quarter of a mile of dove's-neck evening water appear an ocean.

Ever since her embarkation at Stromeferry she has been obliged to give up the dove's-neck and shallop idea. But it has taken little from the edge of her joyous anticipation as she has sat cowering from the fury of the gale under the lea of the cabin, her eyes devouring each reach and bend and landmark dimly seen through the driving vapours

ahead, alongside, and past. The boat is an hour and a half late, and has been still further delayed by the difficulty of landing at a previous stopping-place the half-dozen rough fisher-wives and children who have to be transferred to their boat tossing below.

It is done, and the *Lovedale* again in motion. Jane watches the disappearing blur of red as the boat lifts its broad bows to the waves, with a feeling of interest and envy. Those wives are not bound for such a heaven as she, but at least they are nearer it. As the pale blot on the Strath Glen shore, which the answer to her eager question has certified to be indeed her goal, becomes distincter from growing nearness, her excitement heightens so much that she can no longer remain sitting in her comparative shelter. With tweed cloak gripped tightly round her and felt hat jammed down on her brows, she stands holding on to the side,

exploring the angry, wind-whipped waste for the boat which must surely have put out by now. She sends a breathless question through the roar of the gale to the skipper at her side.

‘Do you see it? I do not.’

He shakes his head. Again she strains her look through the wet scud that stings her eyelids.

‘It ought to be in sight now, ought not it?’

She can scarcely hear his answer, but thinks it is to the effect that the boat may be sheltering behind a spit of land till the last moment. A little reassured, she waits another five minutes—five minutes of raging combat to see, to keep her feet—and then repeats her question. Loud as the answer is, its import is so horrible that she doubts the evidence of her ears, and asks for its repetition. She can no longer doubt. It is quite possible that in view of the exceptional

violence of the weather—weather such as is usually only experienced in mid-winter—the Strath Glen boat may not put out at all.

‘And if it does not,’ she asks gaspingly, ‘what will happen?’

‘You will have to go on to Portree.’

‘And stay the night?’

‘You will have to stay two nights, for to-morrow is Sunday, and no boat runs on Sunday. But there are very good hotels.’

The banal consolation of the last clause is probably due to the consternation of her face. It is no consolation to her. To pass the night in wet heather exposed to all the fury of the elements would seem to her no perceptible addition to the calamity of having her cup thus at the last moment dashed from her lips. She has waited six years, yet the addition of only thirty-six hours to that sum of time seems to her more intolerable than all that has gone before. For a minute or two

she is unconscious of the loud wet battle about her ; it is drowned in the louder battle within.

‘ There it is ! They are coming out, after all !’

She does not know who utters these heavenly words, since her previous informant has moved away from her side. She only knows that they *are* uttered, and a second later her own eyes, blinking from the stinging rain, confirm them, showing her a small dark object apparently motionless on the inky waters ; motionless, yet even as she looks it is a little nearer, a little bigger ; nearer, bigger ; nearer, bigger ; till here it is—oh, joy and wonder !—bobbing under the side.

Shouted speech is going down to it ; shouted speech is coming up from it. A tall, mackintoshed figure, looming giant-like through the mist, is standing up in the bows, sending a searching glance, whose eager keenness seems to burn up the intervening

rain, among the little crowd of people hanging over the steamer's side. A ladder is being let down to the cockleshell tossing below. She is running down the swaying, slippery wetness into the outstretched arms that snatch her into their safe keeping before her foot can touch the rocking boat, and Eden's gates are open at last.

* * * * *

'I have sent for some fresh tea, but I really think you ought to have something stronger—to keep the cold out.'

'There is not any cold to keep out.'

Mrs. Etheredge laughs blissfully, half dazed. The room into which her companion has led her seems impossibly warm and quiet; the three ladies who are sitting round its tea-table incredibly neat and calm; and Lady Barnes' offer of strong drink sounds ironical. What stronger drink could she be offered than that of which she has already

drunk deep, in the ecstasy of broken words that have reached her ear through the tempest, than that one salt kiss snatched from her lips wet with the rushing rain?

‘We have been in *such* a state of mind about you!’ cries Lady Barnes, her languid eyes all ashine, and that vicarious interest in life which lends the strongest stimulus to her existence quickening and enlivening her voice. ‘At one moment they said the boat could not go out. We said it *must*, did not we?’—with a beaming appeal to Miles. ‘Just imagine if we had seen you carried away past us to Portree!’

‘You would not. I should have jumped into the water and swum ashore.’

She laughs recklessly, still not quite come to herself, still with the roar of the gale in her ears and the sting of the salt spray in her eyes. Raindrops hang on her long eyelashes, her hat is askew, and her fringe hangs

in little wet tags and points on her white forehead ; yet never before in two pairs of eyes has she looked so triumphantly handsome. Even to the two neat white women, tea-gowned beside the wood-fire, a doubt occurs as to whether of their own good looks any shred would have survived such an ordeal. The hostess laughs delightedly.

‘ If you had, you could not well have been wetter. You really ought to change at once. It is not safe, is it ? These skirts are perfectly drenched ! Feel ! ’

The appeal and the offer to verify her assertion are both addressed to the same quarter as before, and in a second the young man has dropped on his knees, and is gripping the wet tweed in his strong fingers. At his contact, though it is only with her gown, Jane gives a slight start.

‘ I will not stir without my tea. ’

With the mist in her ears and eyes, she

does not know whether her speech sounds like other people's or not. She only knows that Miles has taken out his pocket-handkerchief and is beginning with solicitous vigour to free her from some of her superfluous moisture by its aid. His back is turned to the two strangers, and to Lady Barnes' observation he seems perfectly indifferent, as from his kneeling posture his eyes send up a flaming message to hers, a message which suddenly changes its character to one of half-suppressed laughter as the sight of an opposite mirror reveals to him that his manœuvres are being observed.

With his blue eyes as full of mirth as passion, he begins to rub her down more vigorously than before. She had forgotten—or had she ever known?—that he could be so light-hearted. Once again the idea strikes her, though in her present state of exaltation it has no power to alarm her, of how little she really knows of him.

CHAPTER XIII.

It seems strange that such a night should be parent to such a morning. It is an emblem of her own past and present, Jane thinks, as she stands alone before breakfast next day on the terrace, looking over the sloping green lawn—green and trim as any Midland manor's—to the Sound across whose narrow space rise the noble barren hills of Skye. The Cuchullins hiding their sharp peaks in the clouds—hiding and then withdrawing them to show them to the sunlight. Glamegg with his feet in the water, and just behind him the twin hill which seems to mimic his forward trend of his scaur ;

other and other mountains, rounded, toothed, and endlessly varied, 'backed like weasles,' notched and bitten, continue the line, and close as at a lake-head the vision.

And on the faces of these hills what a mad riot of shine and rain! What momentary prisms travelling lightning quick! What a race of shadows! What vertical splendours of wet radiance! What intense green oases starting into light! Mrs. Etheredge stands as in a trance, asking herself whether she can be still in the body.

The answer—since we are given small hope of meeting our dogs again within the veil—comes in a storm of barks, through which the pinny shriek of little Elsa pierces, and in another moment the lady to whom that loud dissonance is the ordinary chamber-music stands beside her guest.

'They like a run before breakfast,' she says, 'just down to the Battery and back'—

pointing to where on an earthwork by the shore an old gun points its harmless muzzle at the opposite coast. 'This horrible sport limits their area so much. There is hardly anywhere where they are allowed to go. Is there, Mouflon? is there, Jock? is there, Elsa? You are admiring the view, I suppose? That is Glamegg, and those are the Cuchullins'—in gently bored repetition of what is evidently a too often pattered lesson. 'I, on the other hand, am admiring *you*. There is so much in *setting*, is not there? This is a beautiful setting for'—she hesitates and lowers her voice a little—'a great bliss.' The æsthetic relish in her tone is intense, and she goes on: 'The whole sky and the whole sea and the whole island—not a jarring element, except that nightmare "sport." And as to those two women—there are only two, and I would not have had them but that it would not have been

fair upon the other men. However, they do not count for much. One of them, Mrs. Dayrell, has an "inside," and spends most of her time in her room—a great quality in a guest ; and the other, Mrs. Menzies——’

Her words die in clamour, a clamour this time of unmistakable welcome, as Mouflon—a good-hearted dog, though artificial and *fin-de-siècle*—claws a newcomer's Sunday trousers with his bangled paw, as Jock jumps five times the height of his wire-haired body into the air, and little Elsa spends herself in shrewish coqueties. But to-day her admirer takes no notice of Elsa. To his hostess' delight he does not even perceive *her*. He has neither eyes nor ears for, nor any consciousness of, aught but Jane. He does not offer her his hand, or ask her how she does. He just stands and stares, as we stare at a sunset, at the Parthenon, at any supreme expression of absolute beauty—



dumbed, with our little adjectives dead. And she stares back. Both have the same feeling as on their snatched interview at Richmond, viz., that they have never really seen each other before.

Lady Barnes strolls discreetly on, and after a minute or two they follow her, walking side by side. 'Is it *real*?' They are both asking this question amazedly in their hearts, but the man first puts it into words. To answer himself, he lays hold, as upon an anchor for his belief, of the white certainty of her left hand, and she feels the intensity of his clasp in the pain with which the one ring she wears—her wedding one—is pressed into her flesh. She had thought that that symbol of her bondage had lost its power to wound. Is it a good or a bad omen that it has not?

* * * * *

Though its tinkling bell calls them they

do not go to kirk. Indeed, their hostess begs them not to do so.

‘It would spoil the whole poetry of the situation,’ she says paganly to her friend. ‘I shall not expect you till I see you. Such moments are not to be hurried over. I am afraid I shall be thinking of *you* more than of the poor meenister’s drone.’

She stands watching them as they climb the steep path of the old walled kitchen-garden and disappear among the stems of the little sighing pines that crown it. She sighs, too ; a sigh of delicate, artistic melancholy and real enjoyment. And *they* ? What does not that morning hold for them ? What superb amends for these six years of severance and foregoing ? When it is over, the woman looks back upon it as on a blur of radiance too gorgeous to contemplate with merely mortal eyes ; on endearments whose ecstasy translated itself into sobs, and words that

broke down under their weight of tender meaning and grew inarticulate.

The moment that they reach the shelter of the wood he takes her in his arms, and for the rest of that wonderful morning scarcely lets her go out of them again. Up the fir-needle-strewn path, with a hundred blissful stops for new and ever new caresses, they slowly climb, till from the colonnade of larch-stems they step out upon the rocky brow of the hill, and look down upon the sea, whose tide is running out, and leaving more and more clear green shadows, edging its breeze-crisped purple; look across to the wild Skye cliffs opposite running up to and far beyond where Portree harbour indents the line.

They sit down with their backs to a sun-warmed rock, and he brings her a bundle of bracken for a pillow, but her happy head prefers the pillow of his shoulder. For

awhile they are silent, in a trance of happiness, which no words seem good enough to break. Jane first rouses herself.

‘Come,’ she says, ‘we must talk rationally. Think of the arrears we have to make up. And really, in point of fact, we know so dreadfully little of each other. Six months out of our whole lives, and then six years’ silence, without even a letter.’

This reflection appears to both so affecting that it entails a new interruption, which Jane cuts shorter than it would otherwise have been to pursue her theme.

‘In point of fact, we are almost strangers.’

His answer is to press her more closely to his side with a little laugh.

‘So anyone would say who saw us, would not they?’

She laughs, too.

‘But it is true, all the same. As far as knowledge of each other’s histories go, we

have had to depend upon chance scraps picked up from outside people; and as to our characters and dispositions'—she pauses, and puts up her one free hand to tilt her hat a little more over her forehead, as if that action might aid her in the effort at enlightenment—'there really is so much to ask and tell, that one does not know where to begin.'

'Do not begin.'

'But I must. If you knew the hunger I have to learn how you spent every day, every hour, every minute of those awful blank six years.'

He pushes his hat back, a sort of converse action to her tilting forward of hers, and a tiny plait appears in his sun-and-wind-tanned forehead as his eyes follow two Solan geese hovering over the Sound, smoothly flying and then diving plumb down.

'Is not the present good enough? Let us stick to that to-day.'

Yet she perseveres.

‘For most of the time I did not even know where to think of you. Until Lady Barnes told me of her meeting you in California, I did not even know in what quarter of the globe my heart was.’

The terribleness of that recalled ignorance compels them again to a compensating kiss.

‘Come now,’ she says, sitting up, with a pretty air of determination, ‘this will never do. At this rate I shall never learn anything about you. Give an account of yourself. Where have you been?’

He makes a little playful gesture of despair at the comprehensiveness of the order.

‘Where have I *not* been?’

‘There was not a day, not an hour, scarcely a minute, when I did not picture to myself what you were doing. I want to hear how nearly my fancies tallied with the facts.’

‘You want to know what I did every

minute during six years. How many minutes are there in six years? Darling, you must let me down easy. Ask something a little more possible than that.'

'Very well; I will ask something *quite* easy. In all those many, many minutes that you refuse to account for'—with an agitated laugh—'was there ever *one* when I was quite, *quite* out of your memory?'

'*Never!*'

The emphatic brevity of the negative ought to content her; and, indeed, there is a confident exaltation in her eye and tone.

'I knew it—knew that I was safe in judging you by myself. It was not because I doubted; it was only for the unspeakable pleasure of hearing you say it that I asked.'

'My own!'

—'Yes, you say true; I am your own,' she says, plunging her blue eyes into his bluer

ones with an expression of almost awe, that lifts her declaration out of the region of the amatory into the religious. 'Yours—body, soul, and spirit. "My beloved is mine and I am his"—those words have been ringing in my ears ever since I woke this morning.'

'Darling !'

After a moment the brevity and commonplaceness of his expletive seems to strike him as inadequate, and he adds with a sort of enamoured envy :

'The right words never seem to come to the end of my tongue. I cannot say the beautiful things you do ; but as far as feeling them goes——'

She interrupts him with a happy laugh.

'Do not apologize. I do not complain of you. I will even go further than before—do what not many women would dare after six years : ask you, and with no misgiving as to the answer, whether in all that time you have

ever said or looked or thought one word of love to any other woman? There!

Her voice is full of confident triumph, but this time she cannot read the expected answer written in indignant passion in his eyes even before it hurries from his lips. He is looking down, and for a moment seems to hesitate ; then :

‘I entirely decline to answer any more such senseless questions.’

The words look harsh, but the action that accompanies them cannot be said to come under that head, and if she had had a second’s misgiving — though even that is overstating the case—a tempest of new kisses drowns it.

‘It is my turn to catechize now,’ he says, when at length they subside again into their normal attitude. ‘Do you think that I have no curiosity to know what *you* have been doing all these years? I had one pull over

you, at least. I always knew where to think of you. To me, poor darling! you were always standing in the moonlight by the fountain in the——' He pauses, and her thrilled heart tells her that emotion blocks his utterance; in point of fact, a momentary oblivion of the name of the scene of their parting arrests him, but in a second it comes back, and he ends, 'in the Circular Garden.'

'I scarcely ever went there, on the contrary.'

'Did not you? Well, it shows how much one's fancies are worth. But tell me—begin from the very beginning — did you see me turn and take one last look round the yew hedge? Tell me, did you? Did you?'

The bait is too attractive not to be at once swallowed, and she complies; begins from the very beginning; tells him, as in hungry imagination she has so often already done through wakeful nights and void days, of the

stages of her long misery, the numbness that yet ached, the raging despair, the saltless vapidity of every attempted occupation, the apathetic half-acquiescence, the mad beating against the adamant door of fate ; the stings of conscience, and the efforts to drown them in distasteful duties ; the long catalogue leading up to the final scene beside her husband's death-bed. By the time she reaches it she is drowned in tears, and her shoulders shake with her sobs.

Though the ' winter of her discontent ' has flowered into such a summer, and the concluding words of her story are made indistinct by her whole wet face being buried on her lover's breast, yet it is not without convulsive weeping that she recounts her own refusal of that last request, and the life-long stigma which a dying vengeance had set upon her. The young man follows her : absorption evidenced by

the passionate caresses and indignant interjections with which he continually interrupts it ; and the sight of the entire oversetting that her climax occasions puts him apparently beside himself.

‘ And all this for *me* ! ’ he says in a voice almost as stifled and choked as her own. ‘ *You* have forgiven me ; but how can I ever forgive myself for having brought it on you ? But what does it matter now ? ’—with an abrupt change of key. ‘ Is such wretched, posthumous spite worth one of your precious tears ? ’

Her heart is so close to his that it is a wonder he does not feel the sudden change in its leaping beats at his last words. It is the first jarring note in the heavenly concert of their love. She draws herself away decisively from his arms.

‘ He is dead, ’ she says in a voice grown all at once distinct and dry.

There is a pause, not like the former ones, filled up with long kisses, but of momentary revulsion on her part, and of astonished, and at first uncomprehending, consternation on his.

‘Yes, poor chap!’

There is such unaffected compassion in his tone, compassion so deep and genuine for anyone, friend or foe, who has the misfortune to be dead on a day when such abounding and triumphant life is rioting in his own veins, that she forgives him. It was merely a want of tact, and among the great and noble discoveries which her imperfect knowledge of his character will daily open out to her, there must be one or two of a less admirable kind.

But the little incident has sobered them both, and it is in silence that for awhile they look out straight before them at the radiant pageant which hitherto they have been too

self-absorbed to be more than vaguely aware of as an unneeded heightener of bliss that is already toppling over with its own elevation. It is a day of thousand metamorphoses. A miracle of dove's-neck tints, solid embodied rainbows, have now chased the frowns from the hills. They stand above a sea of such blue as seems fetched from an Apocalyptic vision. And in the lovers' ears is the noise, never ending, not loud but penetrating, of the 'going of the waters.'

* * * * *

They take Lady Barnes at her word. She has implored them to treat time in general, and luncheon-time in particular, as if neither existed, and they have obeyed. The dismembered grouse and ravaged venison-steaks tell them as they enter the dining-room that the repast is quite half over.

'Where *have* you been?' cries the younger and prettier of the two strange ladies, Mrs.

Menzies, shooting her question at Miles as soon as he is within the door, with the embarrassing directness of a child.

For Mrs. Menzies, though twenty-five years of age, and a wife and mother of some standing, is still a child, and, what is more, an *enfant terrible*.

‘I have been at kirk,’ replies Miles without a moment’s hesitation, taking the vacant place beside her, as it is clearly her intention that he should. ‘You did not see me? No, of course you did not, because you were not there yourself.’

It is for the first moment not clear to Mrs. Etheredge where the second empty place at the table is, and she stands for a second or two in flushed uncertainty before discovering that it is beside Mrs. Menzies’ husband. She subsides into it and begins to take off her gloves. A bewildered feeling, engendered partly by her long absence from society, but

Yet she perseveres.

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hours after their reunion, is she beginning to doubt his word? The corners of her mouth droop.

‘I do not know any of your friends.’

‘Is that my fault?’

‘Are they mostly men or women?’

‘Men—nearly all of them.’

There is a certain precipitation in the delivery of this explanation.

‘*Nearly* all of them? Not quite all, then?’

‘Well, there is Lady Barnes.’

‘Yes?’

‘You will allow her to be a friend?’

A slow, happy smile chases the anxiety from the young woman’s face.

‘We should not have been here if she had not. She has been the God in the Car.’
A few moments later: ‘When you met her in California, did you begin *at once* to talk about me?’

‘*At once.* Did not she tell you so?’

‘I did not let her tell me much. It was so soon. And, besides’—warned by a movement of intolerant impatience on his part to avert a recurrence of the kind of comment that had jarred her in the morning—‘I thought I had rather hear it from *you.*’

‘My *very* own!’

They walk on in thrilled silence, sounding sea, delicately brilliant hills, and wheeling, diving, calling sea-birds, all ministers of their joy. Jane regains speech first, recurring with a certain persistency to the theme that had been so ecstatically broken in upon:

‘You saw a good deal of her in London, I suppose?’

‘Yes.’

‘She was taking out a girl—Mabella Clarendon.’

‘Yes.’

‘You went out a good deal yourself?’

Probably he detects the slight grudgingness of tone that accompanies the thought in her mind of her own claustral seclusion.

‘Did I? Did not I? I dare say I did. Anything to kill time—to make it move a little quicker towards September.’

‘Did it *crawl*?’

The grudging is gone out of her voice, exchanged for a rapt curiosity.

‘*Did it?*’

They have reached the covert of a tiny wood of dwarf birch-trees, and with their connivance he lays the rest of his answer on her lips.

In the night that follows she wakes between two dreams of him, to the reflection of what a large proportion of her questions he has answered only by kisses.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE grouse's respite is over, and the stag's perennial suspicion, which must surely embitter his glens and mountain breasts, is about to be again fully justified, for it is Monday morning, and sport has resumed its relentless sway. The guns have gone off in an iron cart for the day. It is a bright, fresh morning after a wet night, and the sun, breaking out, is clearing up the mysteries of the hills. An hour ago their sides had looked flat surfaces ; now they are revealing a thousand surprises, clefts, indentations, scars, and shadows.

‘ I suppose I may virtually wish you good-

bye till next Sunday ?' Mrs. Etheredge says in snatched farewell to her lover. 'Go ! they are calling you.'

'So they are, hang them ! Well, let them call ; let them go without me.'

But both know how much worth is to be attached to this last permission, and at the next impatient shout of his name he leaves her standing in the morning light between the fuchsia hedges—leaves her with one last fond flash of his blue eyes and the words :

'There will always be the evenings.'

The prospect carries her happily through the day ; through the morning, when she escapes alone to revisit the scenes of yesterday's sacred blisses ; through luncheon, made chiefly noticeable by Mrs. Menzies' persistent inquiries of the invalidish Mrs. Dayrell, as to whether there really is anything the matter with her ; and through the afternoon, when Lady Barnes, who has a happy gift for slipping

eel-like through the meshes of uncongenial company, carries her off for a *tête-à-tête* walk.

They leave the other two fair ones engaged in a somewhat animated argument, the one urging upon her companion the immense hygienic gain it would be to her to take a good stretch over the hills, the other setting forth with indignant candour the internal complications which make such a course impossible.

‘They are both intolerable in their different ways,’ says Lady Barnes with dispassionate gentleness; ‘but they were the best I could get. All the nice women seemed engaged. But we need not see them again till teatime.’

They are strolling up through a whispering pine-wood to a little loch that lies reflecting the bold brae above it. A walk runs round it, and a bench set under a larch-tree invites them to rest. For a few moments the speculation as to whether the prospect of meeting

herself has had anything to say to the pre-engagement of all the nice women keeps Jane musing.

‘Do not talk at all if you had rather not,’ says Lady Barnes with low-voiced indulgence. ‘I can quite understand that in your case silence must be so much more golden than any speech, and I feel what a miserable substitute I am for—but *que voulez-vous ?* Sport ! sport ! sport ! horrible despotism in one syllable !’

Jane’s eyes are on the jewelled darkness of the water that holds the already autumn-fired bracken of the hill reflected in it ; a ripple runs across it, and the heather-flowers of the brim, so nicely mirrored a moment ago, become an amethyst blur. A sighing suggestion from her companion reaches her ears :

‘How glad some of them—one of them—would have been to have been let off to-day !’

The other shakes her head.

‘I doubt it.’

‘How far more complex we are than they!
In what a nutshell their tastes lie! Kissing
and killing!’

There is a resigned and gentle distaste in the key with which the elder widow thus epitomizes man’s proclivities, and a pinch of bitter in the question the younger woman puts to her heart, as to whether in the case of her own lover the order should not be reversed, and the killing come first?

‘But, at all events, dear, you had a good time yesterday?’

A delicately-gloved hand accentuates the question, and an answering pressure is all the answer that Mrs. Etheredge’s full heart makes possible.

‘You understand me well enough to know that I never mean to be *proving* or intrusive; but was it really—did it—’

She leaves her seat, and goes out.

greatly as Jane would prefer to let her hallowed memories of that unequalled Sabbath morn lie unprofaned by even an allusion, gratitude forces a choking 'Yes' out of her. The breeze has lain down again, and the heather-flowers reappear in the clear shallows.

'Everything seems to have conspired to heighten your blessedness,' continues Lady Barnes in a tone of gently intense gratification. 'Even his coming in so unexpectedly to money at such an opportune moment. He told you the circumstances, of course?'

Jane shakes her head, blushing a little.

'We never mentioned money.'

'Never stooped to anything so sublunary?'—with an appreciative smile. 'Of course not. But the circumstances were so unusual—his knowing so little of the woman who left it him——'

'The *woman* ?'

'Oh, she was rather old—an eccentric, apparently—one of those happy people with few relations and more money than they know what to do with; but he had never given her a thought since they parted.'

A woman's heart is an oddly-constructed organ, and the turn of the phrase gives Mrs. Etheredge a strange jar. It is now applied to a dead stranger. What if it had been said of herself?

'They met on a Cunarder, when he was going out to America six years ago, and he helped her in some trifling way—with her baggage, I think, when they landed—and, as I say, never gave her another thought until, a few months ago, he received a letter from her solicitors to the effect that she was dead, and had left him—I can't recollect the exact amount, but enough to free you both from squalid butcher and baker cares for the
our lives.'

Jane listens with a bent brow. How far rather she would have endowed him than that he should enrich her! But she chases the thought as unworthy. In a love so perfect as theirs, what does it matter which gives and which takes? Yet the little acrid taste that the story has left on her mental palate, coupled with the reflection—severely banished as soon as recognized—that it was on the voyage immediately following the wrench of his parting with herself that he had won the heart of the eccentric dead, keeps her uncommentingly silent, with her eyes on an empty boat moored under the bank. For such a little loch, how much this one holds in its heart!—so much blue sky! such woolly clouds, ferny mountain-breast and heather-bells!

‘Neither of you gave money a thought,’ murmurs Lady Barnes, with a sort of delicate aesthetic curiosity. ‘You were lifted far,

above it! But did not you make—have not you yet made any plans?’

‘None.’

‘Ah, well, you have plenty of time; the whole radiant future to expatiate in!’

‘Yes.’

The limitless glory of that future, bounded only by infinitely distant death, perhaps dazzles Mrs. Etheredge, for her hand goes up to her brow with a gesture as of shading her eyes.

‘The present! the present! as yet that is enough for you,’ continues Lady Barnes; ‘and no wonder! Barren as my own life has been’—there are moments when her late K.C.B. seems to have slidden out of his lady’s memory—‘how perfectly I can put myself in your position! But when you come down to this dull earth again—do not be in a hurry; stay above it as long as you can’—sighing profoundly—‘but when the

inevitable descent has to be made—when you have settled anything definite, you will tell me, will not you ?’

Jane assents, with a shamefaced inward resolve that for the future she will insist on other answers to her questions than the inarticulate ones which had yesterday rapturously, if not quite satisfactorily, stemmed her utterance. It is a determination that she might have spared herself at least for to-day, since the opportunity for kisses afforded by the little fragment of time spared her by the grouse is meagre indeed.

The men come in late, and tired, and at the nine o’clock dinner, when she sits by Miles, if she puts queries to him, it must be in words alone that he can respond, though his eyes and the necessarily smothered fire of his words tell her how impatient he is of the restriction. Her spirits had flagged a little at the prolongation of a day ironically

empty of him, and the knowledge that, since Lady Barnes has entrusted to him the management of her shooting, every day must be equally empty until the Sunday, that looks so distant.

Now, in the necessarily restrained passion of their close yet public neighbourhood, her heart rises to its former Alp-level, as she sits with her eyes on her plate listening to his broken ejaculations of ecstasy over her beauty, heightened by a low black gown, though lamplight is powerless to improve her admirable complexion. Now and then her shut red lips open to breathe an almost inaudible 'Hush!' when the young man's objurgations on his fellow-guests and vituperations of the publicity of place and circumstance rise into recklessness. This happens so frequently, and she has such increasing difficulty as dinner progresses in keeping him within reasonable bounds, that

connected conversation is impossible. She makes one or two attempts at it. He has put his elbow on the table, ruthlessly turning his shoulder upon his other neighbour, and is shading his eyes with his hand, so as partly to hide the fury of admiration in them, while he tells her how distractingly beautiful she is, that he should like never to see her dressed in another gown than the one she is now wearing, etc.

‘Shall I come down in it to breakfast to-morrow?’ she asks, with what she means to be a sobering little laugh of derision, but which shares too much of the quiver in his own voice to serve its purpose.

He goes off into fresh extravagances, which last without her being able to arrest them till the end of dinner. Perhaps she does not put out her whole strength to quell their rush. They sound too enthrallingly sweet in her unaccustomed ears. But with the realizing



that even dessert is half-way through comes a touch of unaffected dismay, which is perceptible in the ejaculation :

‘I foresee that we shall never have any rational talk. I shall have to get all my information about you from other people. Lady Barnes gave me several new lights this afternoon.’

She says it as jestingly as the excited tremor of her spirits will allow ; but, easily as she has already learnt that he is beguiled into mirth, there is no answering gaiety in his face. On the contrary, a note of abruptness strikes with odd dissonance across the music of his love-song.

‘Lights ! What lights ? What do you mean ?’

‘Ah ! that would be telling,’ she answers, with a surprise at his tone that does not last above a minute, and a coquetry that cannot hold out against the flame of his gaze.

And then—surely, surely sooner than her wont, though in that the hostess is wronged, since she has, on the contrary, purposely delayed her flitting—Lady Barnes sweeps her three ladies away. They have already seen all too much of one another through the long day, and it is with a sigh of frank ennui that Mrs. Menzies, in her character of *enfant terrible*, greets the faint echo of mirth that reaches them even through the stout walls of the well-built house.

‘Do you hear them laughing? How I wish they would let us share the joke! Of course, it is another of Mr. Miles’s stories. Whenever I ask Jim what they have been laughing at, he always says, “Oh, one of Miles’s,” and invariably adds that it is quite impossible to repeat it.’

There is the sound of a restless rustle from the chair occupied by another of the ladies, whom a minute or two later the mistress of

the house lures into an adjacent room under the pretext of something to be shown or told.

‘Of course it is not true,’ she says, with less languor and more precipitancy than her friend has ever before heard in her softly-dragging voice ; ‘and even if it were’—with a resigned shrug of slender lawny shoulders—‘*que voulez-vous ?* Men are like that.’

‘Like what ?’

The question is put by a third voice, the voice of the slandered subject of the talk, and a minute later there is only one person left to answer it, since his defender has retired with judicious precipitation. Yet from the embrace which has eluded them all day, and which the momentary privacy of the half-lit room seems to bid them to, she escapes before his snatching arms have caught her.

‘I have been getting some more new lights upon your character.’

Her tone has the effect of a cold douche upon him, for his arms drop to his sides. Though he looks perfectly at sea, a sort of alarm underlies the bewilderment of his expression. Nor does he, as she afterwards recollects, attempt to question her as to the cause of her changed mood.

‘So this is the way in which we are to spend our one moment.’

There is such bitter disappointment in his tone, such a rush of balked passion in the eyes that are devouring her clouded face, that her suspicions melt, chased and put to shame, and with a charming gesture of abandonment her white arms go penitently out towards him.

‘Oh, here you are! I could not imagine what had become of you,’ cries Mrs. Menzies, putting her head in at the door. ‘We are going to play puff-billiards. It is the only chance of keeping any of you awake.’

With innocent, childish persistency she hunts them from their retreat. The lovers get no kiss that night.

The woman endures the interruption best, since women are born and hereditary endurers. Yet later in the evening she has occasion to admire the superior pliability of her lover's temper, since though at first an ungovernable explosion of wrath had seemed inevitable, yet by-and-by he adapts himself so well to the rule of circumstance as to yell and blow and puff and screech with the best of his fellows, to volley reproaches, exhortations, warnings at the top of his voice to Mrs. Menzies, who has insisted upon being his partner, and to laugh until every handsome tooth in his admirably-planned jaws is visible.

* * * * *

Sunday has come round again, and never was its rest from labour more appreciated by

‘the swink hedger’ than is its repose from pleasure by one of the guests at a Hebridean shooting-lodge. She and her lover, kindly loaned to her for the day by his guns and brother-sportsmen, have clambered over the rocks on the shore, till they reach a nook so sheltered between two blocks that they are unsuspected by the sea-birds, who come sailing past without seeing them till they are close upon them. A curlew, flying so near that its long woodcock beak stands out against the sky, herring-gulls, a pair of herons, a big black-backed gull swimming so pleasantly through the little heave of the quiet sea.

The rocks among which they sit are gray save quite close to the sea, where they are warmly orange, with bladdery seaweed, gray and lichenized, thrown about in every variety of shape and posture ; and on this still day, soft and fair, unharried by any bustling wind,

the peace of their lair is absolutely unbroken. The ideal bliss not reached since last Sunday is again all but within touch. All but——

‘We do not seem to have much to say to each other, after all,’ she murmurs, shaking off, but with difficulty, the rapt silence that is enfolding them both. ‘Have you nothing to tell me?’

‘Nothing but the same old story that you must be sick of hearing—that you are the most beautiful woman in the world, and that I am half out of my mind with love for you.’

There is nothing very original in the mode of presenting this statement, but threadbare as it is, her face shows no signs of finding it so.

‘That is the one thing about you that I have heard on your own authority,’ she says gravely. ‘Every other fact that I have gained has been from other people.’

‘What sort of facts? What other people?’

She begins to check off on the fingers of that hand from which he has just stripped the glove in order to kiss its palm the facts alluded to.

‘That you are a very good all-round man, one of the best—this from the men generally. That you always seem to know by instinct when she needs a footstool—this from Mrs. Dayrell. That’—her tongue slackens and a small perpendicular fold shows itself on her forehead—‘you tell very—remarkable stories after dinner—this from Mrs. Menzies.’

A slight cloud that has swept over it lifts from Miles’s brow.

‘Is that all? Anything more?’

‘You are always rather frightened when I begin to question you,’ says Jane, examining the cleared countenance before her with less passion and more keenness in her eyes than her lover quite relishes. ‘I believe you have some dark spot in your past that you

are afraid of my putting my finger upon. No—do not be angry ; it is only a stupid joke.'

Both have a slightly jarred feeling that the last few minutes have let them down several pegs below their proper level, and Miles takes up the field-glass lying beside him, and looks through it at the kittiwakes, the merganser geese riding on the water, the forked-tailed sea-swallows, the terns, all the happy winged ocean peoples flying and oaring around them. Annoyed though he is, he cannot help rather enjoying watching them ; but he is not long allowed to do so.

'Are you vexed? I thought you could take a joke.'

'I hope I can ; but there was not much joke in telling me that you thought I was a blackguard, was there?'

'I did not !'

‘Words to that effect.’

A slight pause.

‘I am sorry! I beg your pardon!’

‘Do not! do not!’ he cries in a flurry of revived passion, dropping the telescope and enwrapping her again in a long embrace. ‘I beg yours a thousand times for having been so thin-skinned.’

The higher level is again reached, and the argument closed in the manner which Jane had resolved should not be the invariable one it has hitherto proved; but she tries to elevate the situation by whispering in a voice of gentle admonition:

‘We must try to be patient with each other. It is the penalty of my imperfect knowledge of you that I must daily be making new discoveries.’

‘And do you think I am not making new discoveries, too?’ he asks a little ruefully.

It is a point of view that she has not hitherto taken.

The evening light is yellow over Portree and the Rocks as they turn homewards, the sea turning to steel. No sun has been visible for some hours, but towards seven o'clock, as they saunter back by the path that runs homewards along the rock's face, a cloudlet in the east catches a tingeing blush-rose, which presently washes over all the eastern sky, on which some heavy indigo clouds are couchant. It reappears with lovely effect of hinted, more than openly-displayed rose on the backs of the little waves that come curling one after another into the tiny bay.

'It seems a reversal of the order of things—blue clouds on a pink sky,' Jane says in a happy voice.

For the moment there are no clouds on her own sky. On that tenderly-painted

evening by the soothed waters, and with the laid winds, the apogee of her felicity is perhaps reached. An exquisite stillness lies on her heart, for has not she promised to waive all better knowledge of himself and his shortcomings, and wed her beloved with the least possible delay? Yet her sun is not destined to set quite undimmed.

‘Where have you been? Do you know what time it is?’

The question is not addressed to herself, but, though half-way up the stairs to dress for dinner, she overhears it, also her lover’s answer, delivered with his usual cheerful readiness, ‘We lost our way.’

Mrs. Menzies’ laugh rings out.

‘As you and Mabella pretended to do that night at Earl’s Court!’

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CHAPTER XV.

A 'COSTLY' fortnight follows—costly in the Shakespearian sense. Doubtless a great love does not need a background to set it off. It brings its own gold and gems with it, and ought perhaps to leave the lesser blessings of glorious weather, indoor comforts, and outdoor splendours to the only moderately happy or frankly miserable.

Jane is scarcely conscious of the luxurious house, the dainty dinner-table, the flowery fuchsia-hedged garden. Yet they all add their drop of pleasure to her charmed cup. Her days have been for the most part spent without her lover, but the evenings make

amends ; and now and then there has been a day off, dedicated to an expedition. Once it is to the top of the island's highest mountain, an excursion that involves the iron cart, and a long, long climb after it is left. The Skye hills are dressed in their most holiday clothes—holly-day, rather, for there is a feeling of grave sanctity about their high and awful loneliness.

The air breathes full summer, yet is fresh and cool withal, and the colours on the Great Mother's palette blaze with extraordinary vividness. Far ahead of the rest of the party the lovers' winged feet carry them. Around them the moors, undisfigured by wall or railing, spread their sea of heather, their out-cropping gray rocks, their bog-myrtle, their little white sheep, the rough prettiness of their Highland cattle.

Up and up is their flinty climb ; up and up, crossing dark-brown rivulets, stopping to take breath and look back at the jewelled

glories of the mountains and the diamond-specked sapphire of the Sound ; passing a still little mountain loch whence the sunlight has already departed ; up and up, till one final trial of breath and footing, scaling a steep last pitch of slippery flint, lands them on the broad flat summit, where they stand panting hand-in-hand, taking in the extent and splendour of the panorama around them : the Minch, for ever vexed with storms, now shining distant and quiet ; Harris far away ; Applecross and the Inverness-shire mountains coloured like the inside of an oyster-shell ; the white gates to the strait that parts the mainland from Skye shining white and distinct, that strait across which the long-ago Danish princess drew a chain. Jane heaves a deep, deep sigh.

‘ I thought that I ought to have died on Sunday evening, but I am glad I lived till to-day.’

'Darling !'

The heightening of his passion has not enlarged his vocabulary, but he makes up in emphasis what he lacks in variety. Then they stretch themselves to rest on the warm mountain grass, and advance cautious head and eyes over the edge of the precipice that falls so sheer seawards. She grows frightened presently at the daring with which he hangs over the brink, and catches at his arm.

'You will fall over !'

'What would you do if I did ?'

She covers her face with her hands.

'What should I do? What should I do if I lost you now? I do not know. It is unthinkable.'

Later comes the luncheon on the moor, the sun-kissed heather for seats, the hock bottles propped against the heather-twigs, the tawny moors carrying the eye beyond themselves to the splendours of sea and Skye

mountains—Glamegg, the Cuchullins, left so free by the clouds that no mist obscures the features of the couchant giant, who seems to be for ever lying on his back on the summit, with his colossal features standing out against the blue blandness of the heavens.

It is on long days together such as this that Jane learns to know her lover better, to make those discoveries on the unexplored continent of his mind which she had promised herself with so much rapture of anticipation. In the evening his love is prone to become ejaculatory and ebullient, but in the daylight meetings, all too few, which sport spares her, it dawns upon her slowly—for she does not welcome the news—that there are limitations to the endowment of that personality which her unknowing idolatry had vaguely gifted with every mental as well as physical grace. If theirs is to be that ideal union which she had pictured, it must be by the

suppression of one half of her own nature. Mr. Miles never voluntarily opens a book, and the artless dismay written on his countenance when her full heart leads her to illustrate their own bliss by some quoted line from the poets teaches her not to repeat the attempt. There is something affecting in the naïveté with which he throws himself upon her mercy.

‘ Now, you are not going to ask me where that comes from, as you did the other day, for I warn you I have not the foggiest idea.’

She pulls up short, at first with a keener sense of disappointment than she will own to herself, but later with a resolved exaltation. Here is one other sacrifice, one that she had not reckoned upon, to make for him. He is not intellectual ; neither will she be. Whatever in her is uncongenial to him, whatever in her has no use for him, whatever he takes no delight in, that will

she cut off. Since he does not care for it, it cannot be worth the keeping. And if in the region of his intelligence there are some disillusionments to be endured, assuredly there are none in that of his heart. It seems that through all these absent years he has loved her more wholly, more solely, more idolatrously, than even she in her perfect faith in him had realized.

Daily there is less disguise—there never had been much—in the display of his monopolizing worship. Jane has begged her hostess not to tell their fellow-guests of her engagement.

‘Let me keep it to myself for a little while.’

There is such a bright suffusion in her eyes and such a sweet persuasion in her voice—happiness has made her much gentler than her wont—that Lady Barnes surveys her with delighted appreciation.

‘How perfectly I enter into your feelings! What could life give better than the consciousness of having such an exquisite secret locked deep, deep down in one’s own heart? As you know, I have only stood outside the temple and heard the echo of the music.’

She heaves a sigh of perfect cheerfulness, and squeezing her friend’s hand with one of her own, with the other brushes a few needles dropped by the pine-tree above them from the lap of the very modified tailor gown which is all the concession the Highlands can win from her distressed æstheticism.

They are again sitting by the little loch; beside them a small wood of young firs and larches lifts its spires of silver-blue and pallid green, and opposite them a bold-headed hill shows the mingled warmth and coolness of his bronzy brake-fern and his out-cropping limestone. The dogs are lending the tender grace of their characteristic actions to the

beauty of the scene ; Mouflon rolling his negro curls and his monogram with a vigorous relish which must mean a dead rabbit, and Elsa shrieking her indignation at things in general from the water's brink.

‘And yet,’ says the elder woman presently, rising out of her rose-coloured pensiveness, ‘it would be perhaps better to sacrifice a little of the beautiful bloom we both love and make it known. Things might—people might—mistakes might be prevented.’

‘Mistakes? What mistakes?’

‘After all, it is of very little consequence whether we put it into so many words or no, since it is an open secret. No one in their senses could mistake his looks—his eyes. Once or twice’ — laughing low and delightedly—‘I have accidentally intercepted glances not meant for me, and I have felt positively *scorched!*’

So the open secret remains one, a fact

which enables Mrs. Menzies still to ply the young man with her child-like and out-of-countenancing questions and reminiscences, and Mrs. Dayrell to hint to him with delicate reserve the total disorganization of her mechanism. Both get what they wish and expect in return—the former a familiar rallying and rough-and-ready repartee, of which not even his lady-love's unveiled disapproval can break Mr. Miles; and the latter an unwearied and never-failing application of air-cushions and footstools.

Thus the days go by in a golden dream. When he is with her the vision solidifies into reality, and they talk as much as kisses will let them of their near marriage, and make common-sense plans for their future life; but when she is alone again—and other society in his absence is increasingly distasteful to her—the golden mist enwraps her, and earth seems to flee from beneath her feet.

The weather has been un-Hebridean in its gentle windless fostering of the lovers' saunters and sittings on rock and brae and moor, but to-day a change has come. 'Sleek Panope and all her sisters' could no longer play upon the level brine, for a noisy wind is chasing the clouds, singing boisterously in the lashed trees, whipping up the white horses that are galloping in foam across the fierce green-blue and blue-green of the Sound.

Jane's lover has promised an early return to her to-day, so to make the time pass quicker she sets out immediately after luncheon on a solitary walk. Above the sheltering wood she climbs out on the moor, with its rough yet soft delights. The western wind is strong and frolicsome, but would not hurt a fly. Heart and lungs expand in the exquisite air, and the long roll of the moors, unenclosed, barren, and

beautiful, gives an uplifting sense of freedom. What warm browns, what golden yellows, what sweeps of mingled colours more various than the rainbow's 'purpled scarf' can show, feed the eye! And then the ear! Elate voice of the potent breeze, cheep of a flight of titlarks, croak of a lonely raven, and, chiefest melody of all, that arrests the feet and stays the passer-by, the gurgle, the leap, the merry noise of some narrow brown rivulet coursing down the braeside.

Mrs. Etheredge stands with her hat off and her lips apart, silently blessing God for being alive ; blessing, too, every minor agent that empties its little cup of sweetness into her shoreless ocean—each crisp salty air, each moorland voice, each pungent perfume. In an almost fantastic burst of gratitude she throws herself down, kissing the heathery ground, and crying out :

‘ Dear, dear Mother Earth, how can I

thank you enough for having given birth to such a happy, happy woman as I ?'

There is no one but the titlarks to hear her, yet she rises ashamed. None the less does the same overpowering rush of ecstasy sweep over her three or four times on her homeward way, as she leans over the little stone bridge which crosses the burn, pouring, rain-swollen, its rush of burnt umber and its champagne foam over the rocks in its bed, and laving the fronds of the stooped ferns that border it; again as she comes once more in sight of the Sound, and sees its yeasty waves champing and foaming on a ground of dark steel shading into pale.

She stands to watch a herring-boat tacking and tacking back again in the teeth of the wind. How little way it seems to make! Now a yacht comes into her field of vision. What a tossing she is getting! Then both herring-boat and yacht disappear from her

sight as she dips down into the little wood, through which her feet increase their pace as she nears home. He may be already returned and waiting for her.

As she comes once again in sight of the Sound, she perceives with surprise that the yacht she had noticed has brought to, and that a gig from it, apparently full of people, is pulling through the rough water to the landing-place. A sharp feeling of annoyance darts through her. The yacht is one of the R.Y.S., as is evidenced by the white red-crossed ensign hanging over the stern, and it is evident that the occupants of the gig are acquaintances of Lady Barnes, who have come with the intention of drinking tea with her. Will Jane and her lover be able to slip off unobserved and avoid them? If he is not already returned, she must be on the lookout for him to warn him; and if he is back from the moors, he will doubtless be

eagerly on the watch for her. She sees no sign of him outside the house, into which she slips by a side-door, but neither is there any evidence of his presence within. He must be still absent. With a little drag of disappointment her legs carry her up to her bedroom, from whose window she can reconnoitre the arrivals. They have landed and are strolling up the drive, but are still too far off for recognition, if—which is unlikely—they are personally known to her.

But there is no mistaking the tall figure, whose back she sees, advancing from the house to meet them, nor can there be any doubt that the little jimp coat and skirt tripping beside him appertains to Mrs. Menzies. She has evidently captured him at the moment of his return, and the situation being now complicated by the arrival of the batch of strangers, the long ramble

which the lovers had promised each other must obviously be foregone.

Jane has waited for her sweetheart for six years, and is to be married to him in six weeks, yet the trifling contretemps seems to her, in the strung-up state of passion that all the influences of Nature had wrought her into in the course of her solitary walk, almost unbearable. She throws herself down on the sofa and buries her face in its back in a paroxysm of ungovernable disappointment. A whole afternoon lost. Not till next Sunday will such another opportunity be given them, and she had been storing in her heart such exquisite things to say to him. Last night she had perhaps been a little tart to him at bedtime, when Mrs. Menzies had spoilt the beauty of their good-night by a silly joke and silly giggles, and he had not been as much annoyed as he ought, but had giggled a little, too.

To-day she herself had meant to have been all sunshine and honey to him. And now—— A slight indignation against her lover for not having had quickness enough to avoid the trap set for him mixes with her disappointment, and adds to the irritation of her temper. In so disturbed a state of spirits it is impossible that she can face a roomful of chattering strangers. She will stay upstairs till they are gone.

But after awhile the confinement and solitude of her own room grow even more intolerable to her than the other alternative of unwelcome society. An irksome curiosity begins to grow upon her. Surely they are paying an unconscionably long call. Of whom does the party consist? Are there among it any of Miles's friends—those unknown friends of whom a vague and instantly suppressed jealousy has sometimes traversed her, and concerning whom he is never very diffuse?

Is it possible that he has not yet missed her? She smiles proudly at the absurdity of such a hypothesis, but it decides her to steal downstairs on a voyage of discovery. Without joining the company—as to that she may be guided by circumstances—she will be able to reconnoitre, and gain indications as to the likelihood of their departure.

On reaching the hall she catches a glimpse through the open door of figures standing about on the terrace outside. Wafts of laughter and talk reach and drive her to efface herself in the passage leading to the schoolroom, which is always the scene of afternoon tea. That is evidently over now, yet someone still remains in the room, judging by a murmur of voices issuing from the door, which is ajar. She draws near and looks cautiously in. A couple of people, man and woman, are standing near the deserted tea-table so fondly intertwined that her first

impression is one of dismay at having blundered in upon a scene so evidently not staged with a view to spectators ; her second——

It is not true that in the black crises of our lives we have as a rule any premonition of what is about to befall us. The girl who in five minutes will have fallen over the cliff on to the rocks beneath is picking daisies on its edge. The pointsman who is going to be run over by the express has enjoyed his dinner more than usual ; and neither dream nor omen has come to warn Mrs. Etheredge that the last hour of her toppling bliss has struck.

The man's back is towards her, and his arms are enfolding the woman. The latter, with her sailor hat fallen on the floor beside her, her fringe in confusion, her usually inevitable air of all-rightness declined into utter all-wrongness, is lifting her face—the face of Mabella Clarendon—streaming with

tears to his, while he, in a voice in which tenderness and alarm strive for the mastery, is repeating :

‘ Do not cry, darling old girl ! Do not cry ! do not cry ! I cannot bear to see you cry ! ’

Finding speech ineffectual, he stoops his curly head and their lips meet.

* * * * *

The next thing of which Mrs. Etheredge is conscious is that someone—she half thinks it must be herself—is back in her bedroom, looking idly at the cushion on her sofa, which still bears the print of a pressing head. She has a foggy impression that the head was hers, and that she must have been vexed about something when her forehead indented it. She—if this person be really herself—sits quite still like a wooden figure on a chair for a time—some time—a long time perhaps, or is it a short time ?

It does not seem either one or the

—

other. By-and-by the figure lifts itself and walks to the window, and its eyes, looking towards the landing-place, see the white-clad sailors in the gig tossing their oars, and the yacht-party beginning to re-embark. One of the men is in kilt and sporran. How ridiculous he looks !

‘ They are gone.’

Something in the words, uttered just above her breath, seems to wake a partial consciousness, for she presently breaks into a long laugh, and repeats out loud in a mocking voice :

‘ Do not cry, darling old girl ! Do not cry ! do not cry !’

The laugh takes her again and again, but after awhile dies down, and she finds herself once again sitting, a wooden figure with hanging arms, on the chair she had left. She has no sense of present suffering, only a dim knowledge that somewhere in the

background of her mind there is an enormous weight which will presently fall and crush her.

Once again she finds herself at the window. Some time must have elapsed, for the yacht is out of sight, and in its stead the mail-steamer, the *Lovedale*, having dropped the letters for Raasay into the awaiting boat, is puffing on towards Portree. She watches its red funnel and black hull, and the churned white water in its wake, thinking mechanically, 'It is late to-night.'

Another thought follows. By the *Lovedale* is the only means of getting away from the island, and she will be calling here on her daily course to Stromeferry at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. *To get away.* Jane's thoughts—if such woolly vapours can be called so—gradually gain a little form. Her mind, stunned out of all other power, has yet the capacity for pinning itself to this one

idea. *To get away. To get away without seeing anyone.* She must have an excuse. Before long she has found one. Her brain is working quite lucidly now. The letters will be brought in to her presently, as soon as they have been sorted at the post-office, and she can have bad news by them, news that compels her to leave at once. Bad news! It will not be much of a falsehood. She *has* had bad news, has not she? Again she laughs, and settles herself to wait.

* * * * *

‘You are not coming to dinner? and you have had bad news? and you want to go to-morrow morning?’

Lady Barnes has swept in upon her like a tall, soft whirlwind—Jane had braced herself for that inevitable consequence of her maid-sent message—a whirlwind with its best white Brussels lace swathing its dinner-dressed head and consternation in its eye.

‘I want you to order the boat for me.’

‘You have had bad news? Is it *very* bad?’

‘Yes.’

The other pauses a moment or two, evidently awaiting the explanation which does not come.

‘And you *must* go?’

‘Yes, I *must*.’

The hostess flicks her fan open and begins to fan herself with an air of weary irritation.

‘It has been a detestable afternoon! Those tiresome people paying — such a visitation! Mabella Clarendon, too, coming fishing for an invitation—at least, it is a comfort to think that she did not get it—and you disappearing altogether. Why did you do it? He hunted for you everywhere. I never saw him so much upset in my life.’

‘Did not you?’

‘Of course you have told him?’

‘No.’

‘I will send for him at once. You can see him in the boudoir.’

She has made but one step to the door when her passage is barred.

‘You are not to tell him. You are not to tell anyone. You are to order the boat for me, and you are not to ask me any questions.

The other pauses, staggered.

‘What does this mean?’

Hitherto she has not seen her friend’s face, as the candles are unlit, and the light all but gone. Now, as that friend stands waving her back, the last western ray falls on her features. But is it Jane Etheredge’s face that is before her startled eyes, or is it a gutta-percha mask?

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. ETHEREDGE has her way, and steals thief-like from Strath Glen while all the guests are still enfolded in slumber. Lady Barnes, indeed, is awake, and bids her guest good-bye from a bed almost wholly covered with dogs, while a pinny bark, angry though smothered from beneath the bedclothes, betrays that there is even more company present than meets the eye.

‘This is too horrible!’ she says, enwrapping her friend in a final embrace, which annoys little Elsa so much that she has to issue from her retirement to protest, and the energy of the words contrasting strangely with the inevitable long low trail of her

utterance. 'But I refuse to say good-bye. *Auf wiedersehen*. It is possible that you may come back? Your news may turn out to be not so *very* bad after all?'

There is a little note of interrogation, of tender, veiled curiosity in her words.

'Yes, it is possible.'

Mrs. Etheredge acquiesces, because it seems to her the easiest method of getting away, that blind yet overpowering impulse to escape still wholly dominating her. It, and nothing but it, possesses her when she is in the small boat, with her luggage in another one, tossing on the water's uneasy breast, for it is a blustery morning, awaiting the *Lovedale's* mercy.

Nothing else occupies her mind when she is at length picked up and steaming down the Sound. The deck is uncomfortably crowded, most of it being occupied by penned sheep, and the morning's threats soon fulfil

themselves in close fine rain ; but she is aware of neither. She has only the one thought—to get away, to get further away—to reach the railway. And when that aspiration, too, is fulfilled, and the Highland train is carrying her through its succession of—to-day veiled and dripping—beauties, there is still the goading sting of instinct. Further on! Further on! To reach Inverness! To reach Perth! To get on to Euston! To get home! Never but when the exigencies of the train service compel her does she pause or halt.

Morning ripens into noon, noon into afternoon ; afternoon dusks into evening ; evening darkens into night. They stop. They go on. She changes trains. She answers quietly and rationally when she is spoken to, declining offers of newspapers, responding to questions about windows. She supposes that she eats and drinks when others do, but she has no consciousness of anything but the one monopolizing wish to get home.

Through day and night it drives her, through the churn of steamboat and the rush of express train. She continually hears it urging her on. No moment of relaxation in sleep comes to mitigate the fatigue of her journey. But why should there? There is no fatigue to mitigate. She needs slumber as little as does the snorting locomotive, and it is quite as unlikely to come to her.

And now that the goal is reached? Now that the maidservant, hiding probably the discomfiture of her social plans and the burning blaze of her inquisitiveness in disingenuous smiles, has let Jane in—a wire has warned her small establishment to prepare for her—whither can the blind instinct of flight lead her further? Whither, unless it be over the edge of this world? The thought just traverses her mind, for she has no intention of suicide. She has no intention of anything, only she knows that what she

has been fleeing from is the overhanging rock that at her first pause will topple over and crush her.

Now that she has come to a standstill it *must* fall. She has only to wait until it does, nor is that waiting long. Full consciousness of what she has lost, withheld until she has reached her lair, crashes down upon her. It has the same effect as if it were a literal boulder, and she lies for hours motionless on the floor of her room, her face hidden in the carpet and her nails digging into it, while for all her shut eyes the horror of her fate stands before her in blinding light. She that forty-eight hours ago was rich beyond the dreams of avarice, possesses nothing in this or any other world. She had never had but one thing, having sold or tossed away all else to buy it ; and now it is gone, and she has nothing left in this or any other world.

The past is a grinning mockery, the present is hell-fire, and the future is thickest

night. In procession before her pass all that she has sacrificed for that one now gone thing: Her husband, old and crabbed indeed, but who had loved her in his way, and treated her with forbearance and even generosity, and into whose deathbed she had put a sting far sharper than death itself; the desolate old sister-in-law, upon whose broken heart she had flung back her magnanimous offers of help and difficult kindness; the self-less, devoted friend whom she had insulted and alienated; the good name in whose tarnish she had insanely rejoiced, as bringing one more offering to her god's piled altar; the position which would have given her weight and authority among her fellows; the riches that would have been a potent engine for the good of others. What has she cared for others or their good? What has she cared for anything but that huge egotism of passion which has

for six years destroyed earth's lovelinesses and screened heaven from her ?

Before her spreads the gigantic selfishness of her life, and with that terrible revelation comes the twin and more terrible one of the true proportions of that object which for her has blotted out all the rest of creation. For the first time she sees her deity as he is ; the commonplace good fellow, with his cheap jests, his limited intelligence, his promiscuous tendernesses. Memory, turned sleuth-hound, tracks back the path which has led to the final catastrophe, and finds many little indications, unseen or resolutely looked away from at the time, which might have made her, had she heeded them, less unready for it. She has no one to blame but herself, scarcely even him, who has but followed his instincts—must probably always follow them. She herself has juggled away everything that makes life preferable to his cold brother death, and for what ? For part ownership of

six feet of stature ? of a fine set of muscles ?
of a pair of blue eyes ?

On the floor, where she has cast herself,
she writhes in an agony of self-contempt.
Has her love, then, when stripped of its fine
clothes, been nothing but sensuality ? that
love which she had clad in such imperial
purple, and titled with such high names, the
love that had dethroned heaven's King and
overshadowed earth's brotherhood.

* * * * *

For four-and-twenty hours she lies upon
the floor asking herself this awful question,
and at the end of that time she rises ; but the
woman who lifts herself to her staggering
feet is not the one who lay down among the
ashes. She has not tasted food for a day
and a night, her limbs shake under her, and
the changed world which she faces swims
before her ; but she gathers herself together,
makes a careful toilet, forces herself to eat,
and her

¹ even as she bids

her parlourmaid admit a gentleman of the name of Miles who may probably call in the course of the morning.

That he will follow her she has no manner of doubt. As little does any thought of avoiding the meeting cross her mind. It must be, and the sooner the better. In that very room where she had snatched herself in shocked ecstasy from the frantic embrace of his too hasty arms, she will tell him that he is gone out of her life. If her twenty-four hours of grovelling agony have not prepared her for the coming encounter she must do without preparation, for he gives her no time for any other. Almost before she had thought it possible he stands before her. It is clear that he has come straight from the train—travel-stained, with his bright short curls ruffled, pale under his tan, yet in the dishevelled sincerity of his agitation handsomer than ever. Yes, her eyes at least had not deceived her—the shell is what she had thought it.

‘What does this mean? Why have you left me?’

His chest is heaving so much that he can hardly get the words out, and there is the direct simplicity of white truth in look and voice. Her blue eyes go through his like a sword.

‘Do you expect to hold two women in your arms at once?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I am talking of what I *saw*.’

Then he knows that she knows. There is a thunderous pause, the woman pitilessly awaiting the explanation that she knows the man cannot give.

‘You are running away with an idea’—he brings the sentences out in broken stammers. ‘I was wrong—I had no business; but—it meant nothing—only I was sorry for her. She was telling me—about her—her difficulties—her *bills*.’

God knows how

mirthlessly. The statement reveals with such accuracy both the speaker and the person spoken of: the eye unerringly fixed on the main chance of the one, the facile, amorous good-nature of the other.

‘You do not believe me?’

‘I see no reason for disbelief.’

The words, taken by themselves, might imply relenting, condonation, but her whole mien robs him of any hope of such an interpretation.

He begins again with desperate tautology; Miles has never been ‘King of the Dictionary.’

‘I had no business, but it meant nothing. I was sorry for her. I cannot bear to see anyone unhappy.’

He halts a moment, knocked over by an emotion whose reality she cannot doubt; then, as if silence might make him lose ground, takes up his stammering parable again.

‘If you think—if you imagine that she

cares two straws for me—or that I care two straws for her——’

‘I do not think so—not more probably than for all the other Mabellas of the last six years.’

Her own words seem to give such a hideous life to the picture of her long deception that the agony of her soul rings through her sharpened voice and makes him think he has conquered. He falls on his knees before her, clutching her gown, and burying his face in its folds.

‘You know, you *know*, you *know* that whatever I do—whatever I *have* done’—she had thought that her ears could give entrance to no sound more painful than what they have already received, yet they mark the admission—‘I have never loved, never shall love, any woman in the world but you. You believe that I love you?’

Tears are streaming down the beautiful
“And, and there can be no two

opinions as to his own absolute belief in the sob-broken assertion of his creed. She stands perfectly still, not trying to free herself from his convulsive clutching of her gown, knowing that she will be liberated soon enough, liberated for life.

‘I believe that you love me in your way, but unfortunately it is not mine.’

There is no anger in her tone, the immense despair of her soul having crushed all lesser wraths and upbraidings out of it, and he, deceived, thinks that she is relenting, and there is a rapturous note of resuscitated hope, almost coming triumph in his voice :

‘I love you in *my* way and *your* way and in every way that any woman ever was loved from the beginning of the world. I love you—how can I put it more strongly?—as well as—better than you love me.’

She looks down on him with a collectedness that, were his perceptions quicker, might tell him how little cause he has for rejoicing ;

that, even as it is, muffles and makes slow the leapings of his heart.

‘I never loved you.’

‘*What?*’

‘I never loved you. I loved someone that was masquerading in your shape. Never *you*—never *you*!’

She was right in taking no trouble to free herself from his grasp. She is rid of it now. Her clutched gown falls from his loosening hands, and he rises to his feet, restored to dry-eyed manhood by that shock. For a moment or two there is the absolute soundlessness which in our variously noisy lives we so seldom experience, not even a clock to comment upon that forever sundering speech.

‘Are you saying this because you are angry?’

‘I am not angry.’

‘Because it is true?’

‘Yes.’

Then

ble with him.

He goes quite quietly. Just at the last, when he kisses her hand, and she feels the scalding drops trickling upon it from the eyes at whose too much laughter she had sometimes cavilled, an instinct of lunatic jeering mirth seizes her to cry out to him :

‘Do not cry, darling old boy! do not cry! I cannot bear to see you cry!’

But the insulting voice never finds issue from her own throat. She stands at the window to watch him as he goes, knowing that he will not look back, and speaking out aloud to him as he lessens from her view : ‘I bought you very dear—very dear ; and now I have thrown you away.’

He is out of sight, and she turns from the window, murmuring to herself : ‘As a dream when one awaketh.’

THE END.

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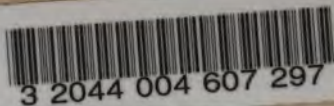
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